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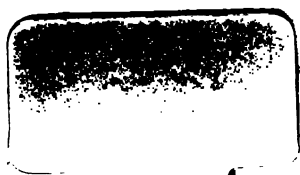
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Adeline  
Sergeant





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## A DEADLY FOE



# A DEADLY FOE

A Romance of the Northern Seas

BY

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# A DEADLY FOE:

*A ROMANCE OF THE NORTHERN SEAS.*



## CHAPTER I.

### LOVERS.

IT was as pretty a scene as in all England you could find. The quaint little village, perched on the slopes of a gradual ascent from beach to cliff, was in itself picturesque, and had been sketched a hundred times for the Royal Academy and minor exhibitions in London: the sea that bathed the sandy shore or dashed itself against the old-fashioned wooden pier was always, and in every mood, an element of beauty; and the fisher-folk, in their blue jerseys and knitted

caps, or scarlet handkerchiefs and striped petticoats, according to sex, were not the least noticeable features of the place. But village and cliff and sea seemed but accessories to the beauty of a girl on whose face the eyes of Frank Lovell were fixed, as he came, lightly enough, along the winding path which led from the main street to a little house and garden half-way up the hill, where Nelly Dene kept watch and ward for him.

They were lovers, of course: they had been lovers ever since their childhood, and they had plighted their troth before they were in their teens. Nelly was six and Frank eleven when they first promised each other that they would be man and wife "some day"; but now that Nelly was nineteen and Frank twenty-four, the day of their union still seemed almost as remote as it had done in those earlier years. For Nelly had not a penny to her fortune; and Frank had hitherto occupied no loftier position than that of third officer on board a merchant-vessel, which sometimes carried a few passengers between Hamburg and Hull. It

was a position which had many disadvantages; and among them was that of offering a very narrow prospect of advancement in the future to an ambitious young man, and of giving him only a very small income for the present.

It was also not the position which might have seemed most natural to him, for he came of a good family, many members of whom had served in the Royal Navy, and had bequeathed to him a love for a seafaring life, which even the merchant-service had failed to extinguish. But he was the sixth boy out of ten children of a not very wealthy country clergyman, and the Vicar of Combe was too sensible a man to set aside an evident vocation because it led his boy into scenes and among companions whose merit it was that they were honest, and whose fault it was not that they were unaristocratic.

But Frank Lovell's chance had come at last. Two or three acts of extraordinary courage had recommended him to the passengers in his vessel, almost as much as his more business-like qualities had endeared

him to its owners ; and a lucky friendship, struck up on board-ship with a certain Captain Peters, had led to his being asked by that gentleman, who was, in fact, a distinguished Arctic explorer, to join him as first officer in an expedition to the North which he was just then contemplating. It would be a dangerous expedition, Captain Peters explained ; there would be privations, hardships, difficulties of every kind ; whereat Frank Lovell had actually thrown his cap in the air and hurrahed for gladness of heart and the joy of conflict which characterises every true-born Englishman.

Danger and privation ! what were they to him save spurs to exertion ? He might be frozen or starved, of course, and leave his bones bleaching among Polar snows ; but then, on the other hand, he might achieve the greatest distinction, and be known as one of the members of the most successful Arctic expeditions ever undertaken. Successful or not, a share in it would give him all the start in the world he needed ; and Frank assured his friend enthusiastically that he was ready to set off at a day's notice. " A day I must

have, you know," he said, "to say good-bye to the old folks—and Nelly."

Captain Peters whistled. "Oh, there's a Nelly in the case, is there?" he said. "And old folks, too? I'm sorry for that, my lad. I've half a mind to declare you disqualified."

"You are very much mistaken, sir, if you think that any of them would object," said Frank, warmly. "Neither my father and mother, nor Nelly, would say a word to hold me back."

"I should like to speak to your father first," said Captain Peters. "I don't know how I got it into my head that you had no near relations, Lovell. As a rule, I prefer men who are unattached. There's no denying, of course, that we run a bit of a risk."

"What's a risk? We run risks every day of our life," said Frank, contemptuously. But Captain Peters refused to discuss the matter any further, until he had conferred with the Reverend Edmund Lovell, Vicar of Combe.

Frank's prognostication was, however, more than correct. What the Vicar said was this :



“God forbid that I should put any obstacle in the way if this is the thing my son desires to do. Have I not always wished to be the father of a line of heroes?” And, indeed, he seemed likely to have his way, for his two elder sons were in the army—one in Burmah and one in Egypt; and his third boy had gone out to the South Seas as a missionary, and the fourth was on a gunboat off the coast of Africa. And here Frank was desiring to join an exploring party to the Arctic regions; while the one remaining boy at school was fighting vigorously against the fate which had offered him a situation on a tea plantation in Ceylon, and declaring that he would enlist as a private if he were not allowed his chance—“like the others”—at Woolwich and Sandhurst. The two girls who were married had been equally adventurous, for one was the wife of a captain in a marching regiment, and the other had chosen a naval doctor for her mate. The Vicar sometimes said, half smiling, half sadly, that he thought there must be a strain of Viking blood in his veins, which had manifested itself less in his own life than in those of his children.

Captain Peters declared himself satisfied of the Vicar's full consent, and renewed his offers to Frank, which offers were immediately accepted. As to Nelly, perhaps Captain Peters did not think it necessary to ask her opinion, for he did not speak of her to Frank again. Certainly, although all the members of the Lovell family then in England lost their hearts at once to the commander of this expedition, and could not speak enough in praise of his quiet manner, his steady life, his far-seeing, beautiful blue eyes—the eyes of a visionary and an enthusiast, as well as of a leader of men—Nelly Dene alone had not a good word for him, and persisted in considering him a kind of arch-fiend, intent on Frank's destruction and the breaking of her heart.

And now there was one week only left before Frank's departure would take place; and he had come to spend some of his last days in the quiet little village where lived those who were most dear to him—which explains why Nelly watched for him at the gate, and why Frank thought her face the fairest thing that he had ever seen.

"Here I am, Nelly!" he called out to her, when he was yet some yards away.

"At last, Frank! I thought you were never coming."

"Why, you impatient darling!"—he had reached the gate by this time, and could lower his voice to the tender pitch required by such words of affection—"What will you do when I am away? Two years, Nelly, and perhaps three; and you—will you be watching for me all that time?"

"I shall never cease to think of you and watch for you, Frank; you may be sure of that."

"Thank you, my darling—my own dear Nell. I shall think of that when I am on the seas, or dragging sledges over ice-floes, or breaking up frozen meat with pick-axes, and otherwise enjoying myself. It will give me heart and strength to think of you here, with your sweet face turned to the sea, watching for me to come home again. And"—his voice grew graver, and even a little tremulous—"if I never come home, Nell—"

"But you will—you will!" she cried with almost feverish eagerness. "You *will* come

back, Frank ; don't say *if* you come back. I cannot bear it—if you do not come back, I shall die too—and come to *you*."

There was a fervent light in her dark eyes, and the rose colour came and went in her oval cheeks ; her red lips trembled as she lifted them with a sweet maidenly frankness and virginal innocence, to be kissed by her lover. They had withdrawn from the gate to the shelter of an arbour in the garden, and Frank was able to put his arm round her, and draw her close to his bosom without fear of observation ; wondering, meanwhile, to himself, whether there was any girl in the world half so sweet and half so charming as his Nelly, and how it was that he had thought so calmly of a separation which would certainly last for years, perhaps even for ever, while she looked fondly up into his face, and felt proud of his manly beauty, the strength of his arm, and the brightness of his resolute eye. And, apart from the natural exaggeration of the lovers, it must be avowed that the twain made a goodly pair.

Frank Lovell came of a strong and vigorous race. Although not unduly tall, he was

rather above middle height and a trifle broader than the rules of strict proportion justified. His limbs were, however, so supple and so muscular, that it was really no wonder to hear him spoken of (by the country paper, where the excellent "derangement of epitaphs" was very much admired by the villagers) as "our local Hercules." "A modern Viking" would perhaps have been a better term. For he was fair—fair as a Northern hero is supposed to be—and his golden hair clustered in short curls and waves around his well-shaped head; while his eyes were grey-blue as the Northern sea itself, though less dreamy than those of his enthusiastic friend Peters, and perhaps more capable of softening with affection for a person, if not for an idea. Like most seamen, he allowed his beard to grow to the approved naval point; but as Nelly had a weakness for a moustache, he had promised her to shave off the beard "when he came home again." In spite of her objections, it became him well, and the trim young officer, in his suit of naval blue, was as handsome a young fellow as you could wish to see.

Nelly formed an absolute contrast—a contrast, not a foil. She was indeed a lovely girl, but she was a decided brunette, with a pearly complexion, tangled, curling, unmanageable black hair, a rosebud mouth, and the most liquid, enchanting and bewildering dark eyes in the world. And Nelly's beauty was as delicate as it was bright; there was no coarseness in her vivid colour, no want of fine modelling about the curves of ear and lip and cheek. She was not very big, but she was as graceful as a fawn; and she had as many pretty ways as a linnet or a kitten. She was, withal, a brave, loving, tender-hearted girl, strongly attached to Frank Lovell, but resolved not to say a word to hold him back from doing what he thought to be his duty.

“Aunt Rachel is hoping to see you,” Nelly said to him, when they had had a little more of their pretty lover-talk in the shady little arbour overlooking the blue and crystal sea—ah, how often would Nelly sit there alone and gaze at the distant horizon and cry her eyes out before Frank could hope to come sailing back to her again!—“and she has got out her

best china and made you the little sugared cakes that you like so much ; so you must stay to tea."

"Of course !" said Frank ; " I came to tea—I came expecting to be asked. I must be at the Vicarage by seven, however ; a friend of mine is coming there for a day or two."

"A friend ! What friend ?" asked Nelly, thinking that she discerned a certain reticence in his tone.

"Dyson—Oliver Dyson ; surgeon on board the *Triton*." The *Triton* was Captain Peters's ship.

"But surely you have not known him very long, Frank dear ?"

"Oh, no ; only since Peters introduced us a month ago. Didn't I mention him to you before ?"

"No, indeed you didn't. And I don't see why you should speak of him as a friend and ask him here to spoil your last few days with us, when you have scarcely known him a month."

"When one is going on an expedition of this kind, Nell, one soon becomes intimate with the men who are to be one's fellow-

voyagers and companions for the next two or three years."

"That is all very well, Frank ; but you don't like this Dr. Dyson very much, although you call him your friend."

Frank was startled. Nelly had read him through and through ; and there was a thought in his mind which he had never attempted to put into words. Nelly's observation revealed to him what it was.

At first he was a little shocked, as well as startled. "Nelly, my dear," he said, "you shouldn't put words into my mouth. I never said I did not like Dyson ; indeed, I think him a very fine fellow—in many ways ; extremely clever and—"

"Oh, you silly boy !" laughed Nelly. "As if you needed to *say* that you did not like him ! As if I could not read your eye, your lips, your tone ! I am a witch ; I know all that is in your heart. You think Dr. Dyson very clever ; you admire him, and all that sort of thing—but you don't quite trust him—for reasons best known to yourself."

Frank reflected. "Now I think of it," he said, "I am not sure that there isn't some



truth in what you say. Nell, I had a sort of notion when I first saw him—but I had no reasons, none in the least; so you can't say that the reasons were best known to myself!"

"What was your notion, dear?" asked Nelly.

"Oh, nothing; I can't tell you, Nell. It was a mere impression of something disagreeable about his manner when I first met him; but it wore off—it wore off immediately. You must not be prejudiced against him, little one. Everybody speaks well of Dyson, and I believe he is a thoroughly good fellow. I do indeed."

Nelly nodded her curly dark head rather unbelievably. "I'll tell you what I think when I see him," she remarked. "But, Frank, do you know—you may call it superstition, if you like—but I believe that when one *has* that sort of feeling about a man—a sort of repulsion or dislike without meaning—it is a warning of some kind, and that one ought to be careful to have as little to do with that person as possible."

Frank threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "You dear little nervous

thing!" he said; "who would have suspected you of old wives' notions? The warning is a little late, my dear, considering that I shall have to be shut up with Dyson in a ship for months at a time, and that, good, bad, or indifferent, we shall all share the same fate."

"Oh, Frank, don't laugh at me," said Nelly, rather piteously. "You know how anxious I shall be; promise me that you will be careful—"

"And not let Dyson knife me or poison me, or throw me overboard," said Frank with redoubling hilarity, which perhaps he emphasised by way of making her ashamed of her fears. At any rate, as she afterwards remembered, his laughter ceased very hurriedly, and was succeeded by a look of sudden anger, when the sound of a voice—a stranger's voice to Nelly, but not unknown to Frank—fell just at that moment upon his ear.

"I beg pardon for intruding; but may I ask if this is the Vicarage of Combe?" said the voice.

Nelly uttered a little scream, and Frank faced round, sharply and suddenly—almost as though he would have shielded her from the

eyes of the new-comer. "How the dev—how on earth did you get here?" he asked.

The man who stood in the garden-path before him was young in figure and general appearance; but a second glance sufficed to tell an observant eye that he was older than he looked. His thin dark face bore marks that do not come in youth; marks of experience, of hard living, probably of long-sustained excitement and dissipation. But it was a handsome face still; and its clearly-cut features were unobscured by any growth of hair except a small black moustache. His sleek dark hair was cut very short and close to the head; his eyes were dark and fine, but half-hidden by slightly-tinted glasses. His dress was simple, well-fitting, and professional; the conventional frock-coat and tall hat looked slightly out of place in a country village. He held in his neatly-gloved hand a small black bag, and inclined his body forward a little in a somewhat deprecatory attitude, as he answered Frank Lovell's not very civil question.

"I came here from the station," he said.  
"I did not know my way to the Vicarage;

but on passing along the road I saw you in the garden, and divined that you were already at home. I hope I do not interrupt. I think I am speaking in the presence of your sister, Lovell?"

"You are quite mistaken," said Lovell, still too much ruffled to speak with his accustomed good-humour. "You are not in the Vicarage garden at all. I am paying a call here. Allow me to point out my father's house to you. It is the grey gabled building yonder, half-covered with creepers, near the church. If you will go on I will join you in a minute or two."

Oliver Dyson bowed, and retreated for perhaps a couple of steps; but he did not take his eyes off Nelly, whose appearance seemed to have struck him. And then Nelly spoke—in a voice of velvet, and with a charming smile.

"Oh, Frank, won't you introduce your friend to me? And don't let me keep you"—when the ceremony had been performed—"if you want to show Dr. Dyson the way to the Vicarage—you can come back to tea," she whispered suddenly and slyly to Frank

in a voice which she felt sure was too low to reach the visitor's ears.

Frank assented with rather a downcast air ; but Nelly threw him a smile which smoothed his brow at once. Dyson turned politely to the gate, and Lovell prepared to follow ; but he had just time to turn to Nelly for a parting word, and to hear her say quite fiercely—

*"I hate him !"*

Frank laughed and went on his way ; but even he, in all his abundant good-nature, could not find Dyson anything but irritating when the doctor turned to him and said in dulcet tones : "That's a very pretty little girl. Not your sister, did you say ? Ah, Lovell, you're a lucky man, and I wish I were in your shoes."

And Frank stared at him, for there was a ring of somewhat odd sincerity in the tone.

## CHAPTER II.

### "THE STRANGER WITHIN THE GATES."

THE Vicarage people did not share Nelly's objection to Dyson. When she went there to dinner next day, she found them all as enthusiastic about him as they had been about Captain Peters—or, at least, she rather rudely told them so. "You raved about Captain Peters's blue eyes, and now you rave about this young doctor's black ones," she said to her special friend and confidante, Nora Lovell, who was two years her senior. "I am sure that Frank is twice as good-looking as either of them."

"You are jealous for Frank's reputation as the handsomest man in the county," said Nora, laughing. "At any rate, you won't be able to say that he sings better than Dr. Dyson. Dear old Frank—he has a voice like a trumpet; but Dr. Dyson sings divinely.

Still, I know which I would rather hear of the two."

And as Nora sighed and turned to the fire with tears in her eyes, Nelly kissed and forgave her ; and they came downstairs together.

This colloquy had taken place in Nora's bedroom, where Nelly had been taking off her cloak and hat. Her aunt, Miss Rachel Dene, with whom she lived in the pretty little cottage half-way up the cliff, had been conducted to a more stately apartment, but Nora's cosy room was the place where Nelly was most at home.

All the Lovells were fond of her. She had shared the lessons of the Vicarage girls, and the games of the Vicarage boys, ever since she could remember. She had no "people" of her own to interfere with her childish friendships or girlish loves. Miss Rachel Dene was the kindest of maiden aunts ; and Nelly had never known for a moment the want of a mother's love. Nevertheless, when Frank had proposed in due form (after an "understanding" with Nelly which had lasted a good number of years !) there had been,

in spite of the Lovells' affection for Nelly, some slight, inexplicable hesitation on their part in consenting to the engagement. Inexplicable, that is to say, to Nelly. Miss Rachel understood.

But finally the hesitation—the delay—whatever it was, came to an end, and the Vicar and his family took Nelly so completely to themselves that she forgot—at least, for a time—that there had ever been any appearance of a difficulty.

There was no dinner-party at the Vicarage that night—only Nelly and her aunt, and Dr. Dyson, "the stranger within the gates." They were all rather quiet, for the shadow of Frank's approaching departure on an expedition which could not be devoid of great peril rendered them little disposed for mirth or frivolity; and yet they were not without cheerfulness. The Vicar especially kept up an appearance of comparative gaiety; he talked, indeed, rather more than usual, and was seconded in his efforts by Frank himself and by Dr. Dyson, who turned out to be a fluent and interesting speaker, full of information and anecdote, and ready to impart all he knew.



Even Nelly, who was prejudiced against him, was forced to own that he was amusing ; and it would have been very ungrateful if she had not owned it, considering that he employed all his powers of mind and language to enchain her attention. She even found herself regretting—just for a second—that Frank did not talk so well.

In the drawing-room, after dinner, however, the remembrance of this half involuntary slight to Frank made her remorsefully try to close her ears to Dyson's clever talk ; she sat with her lover in a corner, and was almost inclined to feel vexed when Dora and Grace proposed some music. Frank's quick eyes read her face.

"Don't you want any music?" he said in her ear.

"Yes, if *you* will sing."

"I'm not worth hearing, compared with Dyson," he rejoined, still in a low voice.

"What do I care about your friend Dyson?" she answered, impatiently. "Why do you praise him so much? There is something about him which I do not like."

"Darling, be nice to him for my sake.

Poor fellow, he is all alone in the world, and hasn't a relation to wish him good-bye. That was why I asked him down here for two or three days before we started—he seemed as if he had no notion what to do with himself."

"Of course, Frank, dear, if you wish it," said Nelly, a little dolefully. "I *am* sorry for him, of course; and if you want me to be kind to him, I will; only—you didn't seem to like him very much yourself last night, and you said—"

"Don't recall my ill-natured speeches," said Frank, good-humouredly. "I was a little put out, I'll own. Let us have some music, and forget these past disturbances."

His sisters meanwhile were pressing Dr. Dyson to sing; but he would not be induced to do so until Frank had, as he expressed it, led the way. So Frank sat down to the piano, and sang a rollicking sea-song, in a full, manly baritone which seemed to breathe of life and vigour as the deep notes rolled out. Nelly listened in delight, and Mrs. Lovell was so pleased with the sweetness of the girl's listening face that she called upon

the Vicar (in a whisper) to admire it with her.

"Ay, Letty, my dear," said the Vicar in her ear, "and it reminds me of the time when I used to sing to you, and you looked at me with a face like that—only prettier and sweeter in my eyes than hers. It is more than thirty years ago, my wife: God grant that those two children may have as happy a married life as we have had."

"I fear there is trouble before them," sighed his wife; but old Mr. Lovell would not listen.

"Capital, Frank; capital! A very good song indeed! And now that you have done your part, perhaps Dr. Dyson will give us something."

Dr. Dyson was quite ready. He had laid a bundle of music-sheets on the piano, and, when Dora was ready to accompany him—he liked to be accompanied, he said; he had not his friend Lovell's talent for accompanying himself—he placed one of these music-sheets before her and began to sing.

Nelly lifted her soft dark eyes, with a little wonder in their lustrous depths, as the song proceeded. How could a man whom she had

thought worthy of dislike sing so divinely? Surely she had been altogether mistaken in her estimate of him. Surely the yearning pathos, the exquisite rise and fall of those melodious notes, could not come from an ungenerous soul, or a nature capable of base thoughts and low desires? The singer seemed to put a charm upon her while he sang. The song was all about love, and faith, and loyalty till death; and to Nelly's simplicity the words seemed to come from the singer's heart. Well—perhaps they did. She woke at last from a dream of passionate, pure devotion to find a sudden silence in the room, and a dimness of unshed tears in her eyes. And it seemed as if others had been affected like herself, for the Vicar was blowing his nose, and Mrs. Lovell's handkerchief was going furtively to her eyes, and Frank's face was turned away. But it was Frank who recovered himself first, and thanked the singer for his song.

"It does one good to hear a song like that, Dyson," he said, warmly. "Old man, I never knew you could sing so well!" And something in his voice betrayed to Nelly that he,

too, was repenting the injustice that he had done to his friend.

Oliver Dyson looked round at his audience with a touch of whimsical amusement. What had he done? Where had these simple folk lived that they had not heard that very ballad given a hundred times better than he could give it? And here they were all wiping their eyes—"snivelling," he said to himself—because he had chosen to throw a little more *tremolo* than usual into his upper notes. He knew his limitations; he had a very sweet, not very strong, tenor voice, with a sympathetic thrill in some of the tones, which he had done his utmost to cultivate. He often sang in private houses and at small concerts, and received a fair meed of praise; but he did not consider his chance of success great enough to encourage him in pursuing music as a profession. He had seldom met with a more appreciative audience than this one; but the fact caused him to sneer rather than feel grateful. He half determined to give up singing. He should not need it on this Arctic trip, which he had undertaken out of sheer dislike of the routine part of his

career, and a desire to obtain notoriety at any price. Mrs. Lovell did not please him at all when she said in her soft, motherly way :

"What an acquisition you will be on board ship, Dr. Dyson! Why, you and Frank can sing duets now and then to amuse yourselves and the crew."

Oliver Dyson smiled his fine, sarcastic smile and said nothing, but Frank laughed aloud.

"We shall hardly feel inclined for singing in that climate, I fancy. Breath will be too precious, eh, Dyson? Still, a good song might warm us up a bit now and then."

"In what form does Captain Peters propose to take fuel, Frank?" asked the Vicar in an interested tone; and from that point an animated discussion arose on the respective methods of obtaining light and heat which had been adopted on previous expeditions to the North; and Dr. Dyson found himself, somewhat unwillingly, obliged to give details concerning the tinned meats, the padded cabins, the wedge-like shape of the vessel, and so on, when he would much sooner have been looking into Nelly's eyes or singing sentimental ballads to the Lovell girls.

"With so many preparations and such forethought," said Mrs. Lovell, with tears in her eyes, "you ought to come back safe."

"Safe! What is safety compared with success, mother?" said Frank, whose ardent nature sometimes outran the reticence with which an English youth guards the secret of his dearest hope. "We shall not come back, I trust, without having gained the object of so many expeditions—we shall bear the key to those Arctic solitudes in our hands."

"Oh, Frank," said Grace—the pretty sister of whom all the family made a pet and plaything—"do you really think you will get to the North Pole?"

"Of course he will, and hang his hat upon it, and cry, 'Hurrah!'" said Nora.

"And find a new country inhabited by savages, and be made king of it," Nelly added, looking at him with fond, adoring eyes.

"King of the Castle! I think that fate will be reserved for someone else," said Frank, "and I hope it will, for I have no ambition that way."

"Besides, one may be there already," said Dr. Dyson, with a smile.

"Yes, fancy him—an aged man with a white beard hung with icicles—a sort of Father Christmas without the holly," said the lively Nora; "and very much astonished he will be to find you playing Tom Tiddler's Ground all over his country."

"Not much picking up gold and silver to be done, I think," said Frank, cheerily, "and your King of the Castle must be rather a lonely person if he inhabits the North Pole all by himself."

To this nonsensical talk the Vicar listened in benevolent silence, and Oliver Dyson in a silence which seemed anything but benevolent. There was an uncomprehending, impatient look in his eyes—a faint sneer upon his lips. The Vicar at last took note of this, and said gently :

"Come, children, Dr. Dyson will think you all very foolish and frivolous. Won't you give us another song, doctor, and so put an end to this trifling conversation?"

Dr. Dyson seemed nothing loath to fulfil the request. He went at once to the piano



and sang ; but this time he avoided the pathetic style, and did not bring tears to anybody's eyes. The evening ended pleasantly enough, and Frank conveyed Nelly home, while the Vicar and Dr. Dyson escorted Miss Dene.

Oliver Dyson persuaded the Lovells to take him to call on the Denes next day, and did his best to be very civil to Nelly ; but strange to say, Nelly, who was generally so amiable and easy to be entreated, would not show anything but a cold and stony front to Dr. Dyson. In vain did the Lovell girls express their wonder, in vain did Frank remonstrate ; Nelly was not to be turned in the doctor's favour.

"I do not like him," she steadily persisted. "I don't know why—I don't really know why one dislikes a toad ; but one does, and there's an end of it. I believe he was born to do Frank and me some injury."

Frank kissed her and called her a silly little goose, but he could not make her change her manner or her opinion. And Oliver Dyson resented the coldness with which she treated him.

It was this resentment which made him utter one day what proved to be a very unfortunate speech. He was sitting on the seashore with Grace, whom he found very pretty, and who was not so sharp-tongued as Nora, nor as keen-witted as Nelly, and to whom he could therefore permit himself to say things which he would never have thought of saying in the presence of the others.

"What a nice girl Miss Eleanor Dene is!" he began.

"Isn't she sweet?" said Grace. "We are all so pleased to think of having her as a sister—one of us really, you know."

"Well, that's very good of you," said Dr. Dyson, with a cynical little smile.

"Good of us—why? She is so nice and so pretty—I hope you do not mean that we should like her better if she were rich?"

"Oh, dear no; such a thought never entered my head. I was only alluding to her unfortunate family history." Then, seeing Grace's look of mingled astonishment and indignation, he added apologetically, "I beg your pardon; I ought not to have mentioned it. Very likely you know nothing about it."

"And *I* know nothing about it either!" said a voice, which made both speakers start to their feet and face the new-comer. It was Nelly Dene herself, who had been seated a little way behind them, busy with her sketch-block and paint-box, at work on a view of the village and bay for Frank, but who, hidden by a great block of stone, had remained invisible to them, and had not realised at first that there was any reason why she should not hear what Grace and Dr. Dyson had to say. She came forward now, with a face from which the colour had died, but with steady lips and sparkling eyes. "If you have anything to say against my family, Dr. Dyson, will you kindly say it to me, and not to my friends?"

Dr. Dyson bit his lip. He saw that he had placed himself, by the exercise of pure spite and malice, in a very unenviable position. Even his self-control was not equal to the strain upon it. He looked this way and that, stammered and coloured, and finally said: "I spoke in haste. I daresay I was mistaken."

"Kindly tell me what you meant," said Nelly, imperiously.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Dene ; you must excuse me. My unguarded remark was based only on a similarity of names ; I had no reason at all for supposing—"

"Never mind your reasons," said Nelly, a little bitterly. "They don't concern me. What do you mean by similarity of names?"

"Excuse me," said Dyson, with an aspect of the deepest concern, "I cannot say anything more, while you have a relation who can enlighten you on all that you wish to know. If you speak to Miss Dene, she will probably be able to set your mind at rest. I spoke rashly—I do most humbly apologise and beg to withdraw my words."

"It is too late," said Nelly. "As you are a gentleman, Dr. Dyson, I call upon you to explain yourself."

"I cannot—indeed, I cannot," he answered, distressfully. "Ask your aunt, and, if you can, forgive me."

And with that very inconclusive reply, he lifted his hat and walked away, while Grace clung, weeping and trembling, to her friend's arm, and Nelly looked straight before her, with a proud and angry light in her beautiful eyes.

"I *will* know," she murmured to herself, "I will make Aunt Rachel tell me what he means. Was *this* the explanation of—of all that I did not understand before?"

She drew her arm away from Grace, went back to the place where she had been sitting, and collected her drawing materials and the rest of her paraphernalia—paint-box, camp-stool, white umbrella and all. When these were all in her hands or on her arm, she turned and looked at Grace.

"You must promise me," she said, in a voice which was so cold and hard that it did not sound at all like Nelly's usually tender voice, "you must promise me, Grace, that you will not say a single word to anyone about what Dr. Dyson said just now. If you do, I will—I will—never speak to you again."

"Oh, Nelly, of course I will promise," said Grace, tearfully; "but, indeed, I don't suppose he meant anything particular, and you must not fret yourself over it—especially now, just when Frank is going away."

"Fret myself!" said Nelly, in her youthful scorn. She turned away, and for a moment did not speak. "I won't fret myself unneces-

sarily, Grace, but I must find out what Dr. Dyson meant. I am going home now to ask Aunt Rachel about it. Don't come with me. Good-bye.”

And Grace watched her with a half-bewildered gaze as she walked away, proudly erect, like an offended princess, with a quick yet stately step. Then Grace began to cry again, and if Frank had been at home, she would certainly have broken her promise to Nelly on the spot, and gone home to tell him everything. But Frank was in London for a few hours, and Grace was therefore relieved of the temptation to break her word.

Meanwhile Oliver Dyson had gone back to the Vicarage, cursing his luck.

“It's all up with me now,” he said. “If ever I had a thought of getting her to throw Lovell over in my favour, I need think of it no more. She'll hate me like poison ever after—when she knows. And what will *he* do? I think I had better be called away at once on important business, before he comes back. If we want to quarrel, we can do it on board the *Triton*.”

So he was gone before Frank came back ;

and by that time also Nelly had learned from her aunt all that was to be told—a secret which had shadowed her young life from its earliest days, although it chanced that the shadow had never before brought her conscious unhappiness.

## CHAPTER III.

### A MAN OF HONOUR.

THERE was a note from Nelly to Frank that night, begging him to come to her first thing in the morning ; and it amazed him not a little, for surely she knew that he would be with her as soon as ever he was free. He had only four days more—was it likely that he would neglect her? But her anxiety was a proof of her love for him, and Frank's heart swelled with an emotion which ordinarily he tried to hold in check, with that dislike to having his feelings harrowed which generally haunts the modern young Englishman. He turned his thoughts all the more quickly, therefore, in another direction. "And what about Dyson?" he said. "What did you say? that he had gone?"

"He left you a message of apology and



regret," said Mr. Lovell. "He was called away suddenly—on important business."

"How did he hear of it? Did he get a telegram?"

"You were last with him, Grace; you went down to the shore with him," said Nora, to poor Grace's confusion. "Did he say anything to you?"

"Oh, no, nothing," said Grace; but her face was crimson, and Frank and Nora exchanged glances of surprise and amusement. The same thought occurred to both of them—that Oliver Dyson had lost his heart to Grace's pretty face, that Grace had refused him, and that the young doctor had left thus abruptly on account of this rebuff.

"Well," said Frank, after a moment's pause, "he'll no doubt explain matters a little when I see him on board ship; but it strikes me he's been in a tremendous hurry."

"Nelly will be glad," said Nora. "She does not like him very much."

"That is putting it mildly," said Frank, laughing. "She makes no secret of her abhorrence."

"He is a horrid, horrid man!" Grace broke

out, to everybody's amazement. "I don't wonder at Nelly's dislike of him; I think I dislike him just as much myself—now."

Everyone felt that there was something here to be explained; but Mrs. Lovell's motherly instinct prevented her from questioning her daughter. Grace would tell her in good time—she felt sure of that. The same idea presented itself to her mind that had occurred to Nora and Frank; Dr. Dyson must have been presuming, and Grace had very properly snubbed him—so Mrs. Lovell expressed it to herself. But no more was said that night.

Frank set off for the Cottage, as Miss Dene's little house was called, soon after breakfast, and, as he anticipated, heard from the maid that Miss Nelly was at home, and that she was expecting him. He was shown, with what he felt to be rather incomprehensible solemnity, into the little drawing-room, which Nelly and her aunt seldom used in a morning; but on this occasion he found it tenanted by Nelly herself. But such a Nelly!—not a Nelly that he knew, but a pale, frozen-looking, rigid girl, in a black dress,

who turned her heavy eyes upon him with a sad intensity of meaning which was little short of tragic.

"Nelly! Nelly! What is the matter? Have you had bad news? Have you lost anyone—any friend or relation? What is it?" cried Frank, seizing her by both hands, and wondering why on earth she held back for a moment from his kiss. But it was only for a moment. After an instant's hesitation she yielded herself to his embrace, and returned his kiss with a sudden fervour such as she had seldom shown to him before.

"Yes—I have lost someone who is very dear to me," the girl said, with passionate earnestness. "I have lost *you*, Frank—and are you not the dearest in all the world to me? But for all that, I have sent for you to say good-bye."

"My darling—we shall have to say good-bye in four days from now," said Frank, gently, for he began to believe that sorrow for the approaching separation had slightly turned her brain. "We need not say it yet. We have four days, thank God! and when I am gone, the time will soon pass."

"You do not understand," said Nelly, drawing herself away from him, and looking at him bravely, although her face was white as snow. "I want to say good-bye to you now, and tell you not to think of me while you are away, Frank—not fancy that you will some day come home and make me your wife ; for that I will never be."

"Never be my wife, Nelly ? What do you mean ?"

"I will never bring disgrace upon you, Frank, and that is what I should do if I became your wife. I will marry no one—and least of all, the man I—love."

"There is something here," said Frank, putting his hands into his pockets and looking at her determinedly, "something here which, as you say, I do not understand. Let us have it out. You are engaged to be married to me, Nelly, and you say that you love me. You know that I love you too—heart and soul. And yet you talk about not marrying me ! That seems to me absurd."

"Oh, no, Frank ; there is nothing absurd about it. How can you use such a word ? It is terrible, dreadful truth. If I married

you, I should bring disgrace and trouble on your head—”

“How?” said Frank, quietly.

She looked at him, opened her lips to speak, then coloured scarlet, and hid her face in her hands. “I can’t tell you—I can’t tell you!” she moaned.

“Shall I tell you, then?” Frank asked, still in the quiet but masterful way which hitherto Nelly had never thought of opposing. “I think that I do know now what you mean. You are speaking of a story long ago done with and forgotten. Is that not true, Nelly? Something out of the past which you have never known, and which you ought never to have heard of, has come to you and frightened you?”

“It has not frightened me. But I know what is due to yourself and to me—to my father’s daughter. Oh, Frank, Frank—my father!”

“Yes, dear. I know all about it. I know all about your father. I knew it before I asked you to marry me, darling.”

Nelly drew back and looked at him with incredulous eyes. “You knew—and yet you never told me!”

"Why should I have told you? You would only have been grieved and pained—as you are now. What business have you to know anything about it?" said Frank, hotly. "Who said anything to you?"

"Aunt Rachel told me. And it is no use protesting—dear, noble Frank. I know you want me to be happy, but I shall never be happy as your wife. Think of it—to marry the daughter of—of—a murderer! You make light of it now, but every year will make the burden heavier. Oh, they ought to have told me before—so that I could have hidden my head somewhere, and known from the very beginning that love and marriage were not meant for me."

She sank back on the sofa and buried her face in the cushions, and Frank could hear the long-drawn sobs in spite of her efforts to subdue them. He seated himself beside her, and calmly put his arm round her waist, but did not speak for some minutes. When she was a little quieter, he managed to draw her towards him, and though she resisted at first, he succeeded in making her rest her head upon his shoulder instead of

on the cushions. This seemed to him a gain.

"Poor little girl!" he said, softly. "Did she think I wasn't going to stand by her in sorrow as well as in joy?"

Nelly thrilled all over. But her answer was ready, although in broken tones. "Not in disgrace," she said.

"Yes, in disgrace. Even if it were your own disgrace, instead of your father's—and after all, Nelly, it was never proved against him."

"But he never denied it—and he fled from the punishment. It *was* disgrace—and his disgrace is mine."

"And suppose you had discovered this after we were married? Would you have left me then, Nelly?"

"Ah—but we are not married."

"Except in heart, and mind, and soul," said Frank, a little more vehemently. "Do you think I believe you could ever marry anyone but me, Nell? And could I ever forget you? We have loved each other too long for that. It isn't as though we had met each other for the first time a week—a month—a

year ago ; we have been playmates, and companions, and friends all our lives ; and what your father did when you were a baby is not to be counted against my knowledge of *you*."

"Frank," said Nelly, faintly, "do your father and mother know?"

"Yes, darling."

"And your sisters and brothers?"

"The elder ones," said Frank, rather reluctantly ; "not Nora, nor Grace, nor Archy."

"Then everyone—almost—has known—except me?"

"My dearest—"

"And that was the reason," said the girl, drawing herself into an erect posture, "why your father and mother hesitated in giving their consent to our engagement. I always wondered why it was—although Aunt Rachel tried to make me believe that it was only because I was so young ; but now I begin to understand. They were afraid—they were ashamed. Oh, Frank, you should never have asked me to be your wife."

"But since I did ask you, Nelly, and since



my parents consented, and you promised, I shall hold you to your word."

"No, Frank," she said, hanging her head, "it would be better for us to part. You are going away, and you will have time to forget me. When you come back, you will find it is easy to turn to someone else—some girl who comes of a stainless ancestry—"

"My dear Nell," said Frank, practically, "I do not marry your ancestry—I marry you."

"It would be easier to say good-bye now," she murmured; but it was plain that her resolution was beginning to give way.

"It would not be easier at all. What, Nell! do you want to take all the heart out of me when I am just starting on this dangerous expedition? Do you want to deprive me of a reason for doing my best and working my hardest? or do you want to make me feel that I had better not come back? Isn't it cruel of you, Nelly, to take away the hope and brightness of my life just when I need it most?"

What could she say? Frank's arguments always seemed irresistible to her; and when,

as now, they were backed by the love she bore him, it was impossible to hold out. But she made a brave stand still. "You know I do not want to make you unhappy," she said, "but indeed—indeed—I think it would be so much better for you if you would give me up. You will be a great man some day, and then how dreadful it will be for you to hear people whisper, 'Do you know whom he married? She is the daughter of — of —,'" "

"Now, Nelly, I will not allow you to use these words," said Frank, decidedly. "You give your father a harsher name than anyone else does. The general opinion at the time was that he would have escaped anything but the lightest possible punishment if he had remained to bear it."

"But he did not remain. He fled. Oh, Frank, do you think you know the whole story?"

"I do, and I will show you that I do by going over the outlines of it," said Frank, promptly. "Your father, a lieutenant in the Marines, had a quarrel with another officer, Major Travis. No one knows exactly how

the quarrel originated ; but as the major was a well-known bully and foul-mouthed black-guard, it can easily be concluded that your father, who was a gallant officer and a gentleman, had right on his side. Didn't you say that to yourself, Nelly ? ”

“ Oh, go on, Frank, go on. You put it so differently—Aunt Rachel did not say all that. She told me that he was—bad.”

“ Then your Aunt Rachel is a fool—forgive me, dear. Everyone knew that Maurice Dene was as good a fellow as ever breathed, and that Travis was a ruffian. The ostensible cause of the quarrel was a bet, but there was something behind that—no one can now tell what. There was a scuffle between the two men in the street, and then they were forcibly separated. That very night, however, Travis was found dead—stone dead—with a bullet through his heart. And your father had disappeared. Except for his disappearance, there was nothing whatever to connect him with the crime.”

“ His disappearance was against him, Frank. And then his pistol was found. And at the inquest—”

"At the inquest, a set of fools brought him in guilty of murder. I grant that. But everybody who knew him, Nelly—my father among the rest—declares that Maurice Dene was incapable of such a base act as that of assassination. He was a fine, noble, generous man—a father to be proud of, my dear, however much appearances may be against him."

"Frank! how good you are! Oh, Frank, do you think, then, that my father did not commit this dreadful act?"

"I do think so. And his daughter should be the last person to accuse him."

Nelly laid her head upon Frank's shoulder again, without invitation, and drew a long breath.

"If I could only think so? His own sister does not believe in him, Frank. She told me that without doubt he was—guilty. And he must at any rate lie for ever under this terrible suspicion, because he never came back to clear himself."

"No, he disappeared utterly and completely. Men don't disappear so completely of their own free will, Nelly. He had a young wife, remember; and you—you poor

little thing—you were only three days old. He would have come back to your mother and to you—if he had been alive.”

“You think he died?”

“Yes, in some curious and unexpected manner. *How*—I don’t suppose we shall ever know. Stranger things have happened, Nelly. He may have met with an accident and lost his memory of the past; he might even have lost his mental balance altogether, especially if he came to know of your poor mother’s death two days afterwards. Or he may have been struck down with sudden illness and died in hospital somewhere. But I fear that we shall never know.”

“Frank,” said Nelly, after a pause, “if your father will tell me—too—that he does not believe him guilty—then I will believe it—and I will—I will *not* give you up.”

“I shall bring him here in half an hour,” said Frank, valiantly, “to assure you of his faith in Maurice Dene’s innocence. And then we shall hear no more about giving me up, Nelly. But how could you dream of such a thing? You make me half afraid to leave you. If you can change your mind so easily,

how shall I feel sure of you when I am far away?"

"But it was not 'easily' changed, Frank," said Nelly, flushing and speaking with a quivering lip. "It was only because—I thought it right—"

And she finished her speech in a shower of tears on Frank's shoulder, while he kissed her a hundred times, and told her that she had only proved herself as true, and honourable, and high-minded as he had always known her to be. And then he set off to find his father, whom he knew to be in his study at that hour.

He told his story, whereat the Vicar was very much moved. "Poor child! poor child!" he said. "I have often told Rachel Dene that she ought to tell her, lest she should hear some word of the story from another source. But Rachel always believed her brother guilty, and would not promise to soften down that belief; therefore I left off persuading her. What upon earth made her tell it just now? to sadden the hours you spend with her before you go! It was unlike her to be so inconsiderate."

"I don't know how it was ; I must inquire," said Frank. And before he left home he had had the whole story from Grace—for Nelly generously refused to inculcate his friend.

"You will come and see her, will you not, father?" he went on. "And there is another point—one that has just suggested itself to me."

It was a point which seemed to require a good deal of discussion, and the Vicar did not get to the Cottage until nearly two hours after Frank's first irruption into his study. He found Nelly in the drawing-room, anxiously awaiting him ; but before he saw her he had a private conference with Miss Rachel in another room. And when he came at last to Nelly, the girl noticed that his eyes were moist, although there was a kindly smile upon his fine old face.

"Nelly, my dear child," he said, holding her by both hands, and looking gravely into her upturned little face, which flushed and paled alternately beneath his gaze, "Frank has told me that you have heard the sad story about your father, and the suspicion

under which, I grieve to say, he is still lying. My dear, your scruples do you honour; but I can freely and frankly bid you to lay them aside. Maurice Dene, your father, was a man of honour. I loved him; he was one of my earliest friends. I am perfectly convinced that he was not to blame for Major Travis's death; and that some concurrence of events, unknown to us, has prevented him from returning to clear himself. I fear that he is no longer in the land of the living, for if he were, I am sure he would have come back to us. But I am as certain of his innocence as I should be if he were my brother or my son. And in this certainty, and in spite of the false accusations that the world has made, I ask you, Nelly, my friend Maurice's daughter, to be my son Frank's wife. Is that sufficient?"

"Oh, Mr. Lovell, you are very—very good. I shall be able to believe in my father's innocence now—although Aunt Rachel does not. And you know—I—I love—Frank."

"I know you do, my dear. I believe you love him so well that you would even make a sacrifice for his sake. Would you not?"



"I would indeed!"

"Then, Nelly, my dear child—my dear daughter, if you will let me call you so—will you consent, even at this short notice, to become Frank's wife before he goes away? I ask it in Frank's name—and my own."

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE MARRIAGE DAY.

NELLY'S first sensations were those of un-mixed surprise and even of dismay. She had never thought of such a thing, she said; and she would have liked a little more time to prepare for it. There seemed to her mind (though she did not put it in words) something almost unmaidenly and indelicate in consenting to such a hurried marriage. But the Vicar gradually dissipated her objections, spoken and unspoken.

"I have no doubt, for one thing," he said to her, with a smile, "that you will feel defrauded of your rights in the matter of pretty dresses and a bright little wedding—eh, Miss Nelly?"

"No, no," said Nelly, blushing hotly; "indeed I do not care about that part of it, Mr. Lovell. Frank and I have often said

that, when it happened, we should like to walk quietly into the church and have it over before anybody knew. And besides, I think, since I have heard about my father, that I would rather we had a very, very simple, quiet wedding. But it seems such a sudden thought."

"You wonder that nobody thought of it before, perhaps. My dear, Frank has pressed the point on me a hundred times. I would never give way to him, because I said it was unfair to fetter you. But now I see the matter in a different light."

He paused, and regarded Nelly earnestly as she sat in a low chair at his side. She looked very young, and simple, and pretty; there was even something fragile about her beauty, something pathetic in her expression, which made his heart yearn over her and desire for her the guardianship and protection of the father whose place he strove, in some sense, to fill.

"Eleanor," he said, calling her by the name which he himself had given to her in baptism, when Miss Dene first brought her, as a tiny orphaned baby, to the near neighbourhood of

her father's friend, "Eleanor, I have great confidence in you. I have seen you grow up from childhood to womanhood, and I fully believe that it is a noble womanhood. When you have given your heart you will be faithful. Having once loved my boy Frank, you will love him to the end."

"Oh, yes, indeed I will," cried Nelly, with glistening eyes.

"And by saying 'the end' I do not mean that I want to bind you down foolishly to promise faithfulness beyond the life of either of you, or anything of that kind. Yes"—seeing Nelly shrink and start—"one is obliged to think of possibilities, my dear. If Frank never came back, you would mourn for him—but scarcely more, I think, as his wife than now. Indeed, it might be a comfort to you to know that you had been his wife, even for a day or two."

"Yes," Nelly said, shyly—she thought it would.

"Therefore, my dear, I have the less hesitation in allowing you and Frank to carry out this project—if you wish. Frank has been pointing out to me certain contingencies

which I had overlooked. Your aunt, my dear, has an annuity which dies with her. She tells me that she is in very delicate health, and that she is alarmed for your future. Of course, as long as I live you would always be able to have a home with us ; but I am growing an old man, and if I died the home would be broken up and the members of my family dispersed. As a matter of fact, it is possible that you might find yourself in a very desolate position some day, even if Frank were away for two or three years only—or if, as we must occasionally remind ourselves, if it were God's will that he should not return."

"Oh, Mr. Lovell—*must* we think of all this?"

"Yes, we must, my dear. What is to be thought of is also this. Frank's pay would be made over to you, whether I were dead or alive, in the natural order of things, if you were his wife—he could leave instructions that you should receive it regularly. And, in case of his death, you might be entitled to a pension—a small one, no doubt, but sufficient to keep you out of want. My dear child, I have only learned within the last few hours

the fact that your aunt's annuity dies with her. I had the idea that you would be well provided for—but it is not so. It is this—this purely worldly motive, which has made me withdraw my opposition to Frank's marriage with you before he goes away. I have spoken to you, Eleanor, as to a sensible woman; and I trust to your judgment and reasonableness to make you see the justice of our proposition."

"It looks as if I were marrying him for money!" exclaimed Nelly, with tears in her eyes.

"But, my child, those who know you will know better. No, you will marry him because you love him, and because we love you."

There was nothing for Nelly to say. She consented; and the Vicar at once called in Frank, who bestowed rapturous kisses and tender words upon her, but also brought grief to her heart by announcing that he should have to go to London by the next train, in order to procure the special licence for their marriage.

"And then we shall have scarcely two days," murmured Nelly.

"But two days together, dearest," Frank answered, consolingly, and was off almost at once, for, as he had assured her, he had not a moment to spare.

When he was gone, Nelly sought out her aunt with some timidity. She felt, however, that she could better understand her now. Miss Rachel Dene had always been kindness itself to the orphaned girl, but Nelly had sometimes felt as if a certain sternness of disposition lay behind the kindly actions. She was an upright, inflexible woman, strictly truthful and honourable, almost incapable of a weakness, and somewhat intolerant of frailty. It was easy to see that she would be disposed to judge her brother Maurice severely, and believe the worst of him. She was a religious woman; Maurice had been, in her opinion at least, an irreligious man. She had put him down as guilty from the very first, and had never once allowed her deliberate judgment of probabilities to swerve. The public, who did not know the man, thought him guilty of murder and cowardly flight from punishment; Rachel Dene, his sister, who did know the man,

thought him guilty, too. Nevertheless, she had brought up his forlorn little daughter with kindness and affection, which was all the more creditable to her because she was not devoid of gloomy doubts concerning the nature of Nelly's disposition, and whether she did not inherit evil tendencies from the father whose career had been so deeply stained and whose end was so mysterious and so sad.

In person Miss Rachel was a tall, dark woman, of rather striking appearance; her eyes were dark and deep-set; her features regular and passionless; her hair white as snow.

Nelly revered her as the best and most unselfish woman she had ever known; she loved her too, but was not without a little awe of her. And on the present occasion she hardly knew what to expect.

But Aunt Rachel was very kind. She drew Nelly towards her and kissed her with unaccustomed tenderness; then, taking her by both hands, she looked keenly into the girl's sweet, blushing, downcast face.

"Child," she said, "I let Mr. Lovell speak to you, and he says that you have consented



to the marriage before Frank goes away. Now tell me, are you sure of your own mind? Do you love this man, Frank Lovell?"

"I do indeed, aunt—with all my heart and soul."

Miss Dene still looked at her, and drew a long breath. "Such a child as you seem to me," she said. "And yet your mother was not older when she died! You speak as if you love him; and you generally know what you want, and what you mean—I'll say that for you. Well, Eleanor, if you love him, I will confess to you that it will be a comfort to my mind to see you married to him, even before he sails. I have been unhappy to think that the marriage was to be delayed so long."

"You never said so before, auntie," said the girl, half reproachfully.

"Because I did not know until lately, my dear, how uncertain my life was. I can tell you now, and you will see for yourself what anxiety I have lately been bearing—chiefly on your account. It is possible that I may die at any moment—not probable," she added, seeing Nelly's look of horror, "but decidedly

possible. And in that case, my poor child, I have often thought what would become of you. I could leave you no money behind, except a very little that I have saved; and it would not be fitting—even if you were capable for it—that you should go out into the world to work for yourself. Yes, it is better for you to marry Frank—if you love him.”

“I love him so well,” said Nelly, “that I am almost sorry to hear that it is for my personal advantage to marry him.”

“You will not think so in a few years,” said her aunt, somewhat grimly. Then, in a softened voice, “I have tried to do my duty to you, Nelly, and it will certainly make me happier about you if I know that you have a husband and a protector before I die.”

“Oh, but you are not going to die yet, auntie!” said Nelly, putting her arms fondly round Miss Rachel’s withered neck. She did not often indulge in such caresses, but there was something in her aunt’s face at this moment which emboldened her.

“I hope not,” said Aunt Rachel, more

softly than usual, "but the doctor is not very encouraging. I won't sadden you by talking of death to-day, my dear child—it is of marriage that we are going to speak."

"But, Aunt Rachel, I want so much to know—"

"Next week, Eleanor," said Miss Dene, a little sadly, "we shall have plenty of time for talking about my ailments." And Nelly was silenced, for the tears rushed into her eyes at the thought of that "next week."

On an occasion of this kind, Miss Dene was not above the discussion of such frivolities as dress and ornaments; and presently the Vicarage girls, having just learnt the news, rushed in, and almost overwhelmed Nelly with their excitement. It was not until night, therefore, that she found an opportunity of conveying to her aunt a piece of information which she thought it well for Miss Dene to know.

"Aunt Rachel," she said, "Mr. Lovell told me that he believed in my father's innocence."

Miss Rachel smiled, with a touch of scorn that Nelly found hard to bear.

"If Mr. Lovell thinks so," she said, standing her ground, "why should I not think so too?"

"Certainly," said her aunt, calmly. "Yes, it is better for you that you should—if you can. Mr. Lovell is a man of strong affections, and—I am afraid I must say it—of weak character. He would believe no evil of a person whom he loved. That is, no doubt, the happiest state of mind, to have no logical faculty and no power of weighing evidence."

Nelly shivered a little. "But, if my father were brave and honourable," she said, almost in a whisper, "surely he could not have changed his disposition and become bad all at once."

"My poor girl," said Miss Dene, pityingly, "how little you know of the human heart! It is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Your father excelled in what are called manly exercises; he was fair to look upon, but he had no true faith in his heart; and what could one expect from him but deeds of darkness and of iniquity!"

"It seems to me, Aunt Rachel," said Nelly quickly, but with a certain amount of dignity,

"that you are unjust to my father, because he did not hold exactly the same doctrines that you do. At any rate, it is more becoming for his daughter to believe that her father is innocent—until he is proved guilty. Why should Mr. Lovell think better of him than his own child?"

"Well, perhaps you are right, my dear," said Aunt Rachel, in a low, sad tone. "I have no wish to make you think ill of him. If it is for your comfort to think him innocent, think so by all means. It is a thing that we shall never know."

"We may know yet," said Nelly, with kindling eyes. "Oh, it would be a grand thing to clear one's father's name! And then, perhaps—perhaps—he might hear of it and come back."

"He is dead," said Miss Dene, gloomily; "I am certain that he is dead. He would have come if he could."

"There!" cried Nelly. "You see! You believe in his honour and good faith in spite of yourself, in spite of the evidence that you weigh so accurately. You confirm my faith in him, Aunt Rachel; and I believe that the

day will come when his innocence will be established and made clear to all the world."

Aunt Rachel was in a forbearing mood, and therefore did not answer. In fact, she saw that Nelly's nerves were quivering, and that a very little over-excitement or opposition would break down the appearance of calm that she was endeavouring to preserve. She loved the girl, in spite of her outward coldness, and so she was good to her, and did not contradict her vehement expression of belief in that unknown father, whom Miss Dene conscientiously looked upon as a murderer.

"Grace," said Frank, in one of the few spare moments which remained to him, "Miss Dene said something which led me to think that you know how Nelly first heard a whisper of that story against her father. How was it? *You* didn't tell her, I suppose?"

"I knew nothing about it, Frank. I heard it for the first time when mamma told Nora and me yesterday," for the Vicar and his wife had decided that further silence on the subject was inadvisable.

"Then how did Nelly hear of it?"

"Frank, she made me promise not to tell."

"Nonsense; I absolve you. Of course *she* will tell me; I mean to ask her about it myself. But you must tell me too."

"It was Dr. Dyson," said Grace, looking frightened and guilty.

"Dyson! The devil!" said Frank.

"Oh, Frank, you shouldn't say such words," moaned poor Grace, very much shocked.

"What business had Dyson to know anything about it? And how did he come to say it to *her*? What an infernal brute he must be!"

"It was not to her, Frank; it was to me." And then Grace related the details of the interview, whereat her brother set his teeth and clenched his fist in a way that very much alarmed the timid girl. "Oh, Frank, you won't do anything to him, will you?" she concluded.

"You may be very sure, Grace, that I shall have a reckoning with him one day or another," said Frank, grimly, and would say no more. After this explanation he did not seek one from Nelly. He knew all that he

wished to know, and that was enough. He should tell Dyson to hold his tongue ; he was not sure that he wished to do anything more. For one thing, it was bad to have quarrels on board ship. But he would take care to silence Dyson's chattering tongue.

So the wedding was celebrated in the little grey church on the hill, and, although there were no conventional wedding clothes and no wedding festivities, the marriage was witnessed by crowds of people from far and near, and the village was made gay by wreaths of flowers and a great display of bunting. For the news that Frank Lovell and Nelly Dene were to be married, before he sailed away to the North, spread like wild-fire as soon as ever it was announced, and the village folk and their friends would not have missed the sight for anything. It was rather a sad wedding, in spite of their well-meant efforts to make it gay. There was scarcely a dry eye in the church when the two young people, so soon to be separated, and perhaps for evermore, plighted their troth and exchanged their vows of faithfulness.

“ Eh, puir things ! ” said one old body, as



she watched the little bridal procession leave the church, "I doot but what they've sorrow before them!"

"*He'll* never see her again, when once the sails is set," said another melancholy villager. "It is a poor tale for Miss Nelly, as was allays the pride o' Combe."

"She'd better ha' waited," said a third. "She's nobbut a gell. Mr. Right may come along yet, as the sayin' is, and then where 'ud she be?"

"In seven year," said the first speaker, "she can marry again, be he alive or dead. That's the law wi' all seafarin' folk."

"She'd better ha' waited to see him back again, poor soul! But they be maain fond of each other, an' maakes a goodly couple. Well, I wish 'em well, for one; but it's a poor look-out."

Neither Frank nor Nelly would have relished these comments on their marriage; but, fortunately, they did not come to the ears of the bridal pair. It was long narrated in the village, however, that everything seemed to go wrong that day. The ring got lost, the bridegroom stumbled on the threshold,

a thunderstorm broke over the village just at the wedding hour. But these omens might have gone for nothing had the bridal procession not been met by a funeral train just as it left the church. This was a sign of evil which struck terror to the villagers' hearts, and was not without its effect on wiser folk. The funeral came from a distance, and nobody had thought of putting it off. It certainly arrived, as even the parson said, at a most unlucky time.

Nelly turned white, and clung to her husband's arm convulsively, as the funeral train went by; but Frank looked down at her with a smile.

"Death must come some day, you know, darling," he said to her, "and we may be sure that it will not come before God's own time."

She was comforted, and looked up in his face with returning colour and answering smile; but a chill had fallen on the already somewhat unnatural gaiety of the wedding guests, and it was difficult to restore the festive character of the party. Nelly and Frank were, however, too deeply absorbed in

each other to be very sensible of the downcast looks of others.

They spent two days of Paradise ; then came the bitter parting, the bitterer for the closeness of their union, and the blank of a separation which might never have an earthly end.

The good ship *Triton* sailed proudly away, and steered for the Northern seas ; and Nelly felt as if half her life and all her heart had gone with it.

And days passed into weeks, and weeks into months, and months into a tale of years, before anything was heard again of the *Triton* and its crew.

## CHAPTER V.


### DESPAIR.

A LAND of whiteness illimitable. A land of ice and snow. A place where there seemed to be no sound, no distance, no measurable space of time. Wherever the eye could reach there was the same monotony of colour, or want of colour; and the everlasting darkness of mid-winter seemed even less ghastly than the perpetual sunlight of a summer's day. By the alternations of light and darkness alone could the seasons be known, and the blinding brightness which knew no shadow might well make a wanderer in those silent regions dread the month of June even more than that of December.

But, as well as certain sojourners in that distressful country could surmise, it must have been neither summer nor winter, but about the time of April suns and showers in

happier lands. For there was light now for some part of the day, and they had not seen the sun for months. They had seen strange lights indeed. The northern streamers had displayed their fiery banners in the sky, and the stars had shown themselves as keen and clear as silvered steel, but the honest everyday light of the sun had been hidden from them, and they had hungered for it as men hunger for bread. It had come at last, but only to show them more clearly the depths of desolation that they had reached.

They had made a little hut for themselves out of the remains of a boat and some sledges which they had dragged for miles over weary stretches of snow-field and ice-floe. They had not been able to go any further. One by one the companions of their voyage had been left behind, worn out by the privations of the way. When three men only were left—the three who possessed perhaps a greater share of endurance, and enthusiasm, and courage than their fellows—they consulted together, and determined to go neither backward nor forward until winter broke. The winter was just then coming on, and they



had provisions which would last them, with care, for several months. But the boat had to be sacrificed, and with it the leader of the expedition knew that his last hope of success had gone. He said nothing of his disappointment, but the two friends who were left him knew that his heart was broken. He had been an enthusiast for his own theory, and he had believed that he could master those difficulties which have baffled the skill and the heroism of so many Arctic explorers. And now his ambition was baffled, and the man with whose name England should one day ring was not he.

His heart was broken, although he said nothing, and did his work like the other men. But when the spring came, it brought him no gleam of hope, no spark of energy; he first grew too weak to work, and then too weak to stand alone; finally he died without word or sign, either of guidance, farewell, or regret.

The two men who were thus left alone together in that desolate land were not naturally friends, but were forced into a semblance of friendship by common danger and diffi-

culty. On the day of Captain Peters's death, they spoke together in low tones, as they had never spoken before, concerning the chances of their return to England; and for the first time they seemed to admit to themselves that it was far from likely that they should ever tread English shores again.

"We are the last two," said one of them, gloomily. "One of us will go next. And the last one will die, or go mad, as best he may."

"Keep your heart up," said the other, in a bolder tone. "The winter is pretty well over; we may yet do something when summer's here."

"What can we do? To go on is certain death; to go back is impossible."

"We may be found yet by a relief party."

"You know very well, Lovell, that Peters always said there was nothing so unlikely. Curse the expedition! curse the whole thing! Why did I come?"

Frank Lovell looked away. His head and face, like the whole of his body, was so muffled in furs that scarcely a feature could be seen; but his eyes bespoke a melancholy

determination which nothing had yet succeeded in daunting. Yet, if ever he had cause for dejection, it was at that moment ; for the Captain's death had deprived him of his strongest hopes, and he was left in the frozen solitudes to the sole companionship of a man whom he had learned, during the past three years, to dislike and to distrust.

Oliver Dyson, sitting in the semi-darkness of the hut, with his head on his knees, looked like some sick and sullen animal that would not consort with its kind. Frank Lovell glanced at him and did not speak ; then his eyes sought the pallet at the further end of the rude shelter, where lay, stiff and stark, the body of the man who was once the life and soul of an expedition which had brought a goodly crew of manful Englishmen to their death. There he lay, looking wonderfully calm and untroubled ; and Frank's heart swelled with an emotion not unlike envy, as he thought of the lingering days before him, which could lead but to one end, and would certainly be marked only by increasing agonies of bodily weakness, grief and pain. But these thoughts



he shook off as unworthy of himself, and thinking it well to rouse Dyson to some form of action, he said :

"We must choose some spot in which to bury him."

"Bury him! There speaks the parson's son!" said Dyson, in a sneering tone, as he lifted his head from his hands. "How can we bury a man here? Do you call a hole in the ice burial?"

"It is the best we can give him," said Frank, steadily, as he took up a pickaxe, "and we had better see about it now."

Dyson rose with a growl and followed him out of the hut. All that they could do was to lay their leader in a grave hewn out of the ice and leave him there. There was no vestige of the ice-bound earth to be seen for many a mile, and the huge mass of ice on which they had made their enforced settlement was impervious to any action of the sun save on its extreme surface. The men who were laid to their long rest in this part of the world could only be roughly covered with great slabs of ice, and might remain unchanged in form and feature for a

century. There was scarcely a possibility of decay ; the dead body was changed to stone, and was durable as stone.

“ You had better say a prayer or two,” said Dyson, when all that remained of poor Captain Peters was carried to his icy grave. “ You should know how to act parson better than I.”

The jeering tone jarred upon Frank’s whole nature ; but at that moment he took no ostensible notice of it. He bowed his head and read a portion of the funeral service from a little Prayer Book which he had brought with him ; and Dyson, standing at a short distance from him, seemed to listen, although he did not attempt to respond or join. When Frank had closed the book, the two men walked back to their hut in silence, and entered it for the night.

It was a very small place, lined almost entirely with the furs and skins which the travellers had brought with them. The original owners of some of them were now sleeping in graves like the one to which the Captain had been consigned, and had left their possessions for the survivors’ use. There

were the stores and the tools brought from the ship ; there was a rough table and stool, put together by Frank himself, for lack of other occupation, and a few utensils for cooking ; there was a lamp—seldom lighted, however, because the stock of oil was low—and there were writing materials and a book or two. They had kept up the habit of making entries in the log-book every day ; and Frank now sat down to chronicle, with an unsteady hand, the death and burial of Captain Peters. Dyson wrapped himself closely in a bear-skin, and lay huddled up for warmth upon the bed, with his face turned to the wall. He was subject to these fits of depression, and Lovell sometimes wondered how he had lived through them ; men who were stronger in frame and cheerfuller in spirit had succumbed to the privations which all members of the expedition had had to endure. Frank himself possessed great bodily strength and great powers of endurance ; but Dyson was slight and even delicate-looking. Yet he had outlived many stronger men. Lovell looked at him once or twice, as he sat at the table, and asked himself how they were going to

live side by side, now that Peters, their head, was gone. Dyson had always betrayed a certain jealousy and dislike of Frank Lovell, since the voyage first began; and Captain Peters had more than once energetically declared that he would never have allowed these two men to come on board if he had known beforehand that there was bad blood between them. "Union is strength," he said, "and men that are unfriendly bring disasters in their train." It was of this saying that Frank thought, as he made his last entry in the log-book. By the strange ordering of fate, the two men who were not friends—who might almost be called foes—were the only survivors of the twenty who had started on this expedition. How were they to live together, to die together, as they would most likely have to do, if they were not friends, but foes?

"Dyson," he said, suddenly, "are you asleep? I want to speak to you."

Dyson made a movement and a half-articulate sound, to show that he was awake.

"There is something I want to say. Now

that poor Peters is gone, we are left alone—you and I. We haven't always been very friendly—you know why." He alluded to a few short and sharp words which had passed between them soon after the commencement of the voyage, when Frank had expressed his opinion of Dyson's conduct in gossiping with Grace, in Nelly's hearing, concerning the history of Maurice Dene. There had never been peace between them since that day. "But would it not be better now," Frank proceeded, "to let bygones be bygones and be good friends? I hope you bear no malice; I bear none; and if I ever offended you, Dyson, I am willing to ask your pardon. But it is a horrible thought to me that in this lonely place, where perhaps we shall never see another human face beside each other's, we should keep up any feeling of ill-will."

"I have no ill-will," said Dyson, in a strange, dry voice. "You insulted me once—but that's over long ago. What is the use of quarrelling—as you say?"

Frank had not said so exactly, but it was not worth while to contradict his companion's

statement, and he simply stretched out his hand.

"Shake hands, old fellow," he said. "I'm sorry if my temper got the better of me. But for God's sake let us be friends now. We are not wild beasts that we should go down to the grave snarling at one another."

"Better if we were, perhaps," said Dyson, bitterly, as he slid his long white fingers into Lovell's bronzed and hardened palm. "Then we should not know what we were leaving behind."

"It is hard to think of that," Frank answered, simply, "but there is another side to it—*then* we should not know that we had a heaven to go to."

"You really believe all that?" said Dyson, staring hard at him in the dim and smoky light of the lamp that hung from the low roof.

"Believe in another life, my dear fellow? I should think I did. I should be miserable indeed if I didn't believe that this journey of ours leads us to a land where we shall some day see again the friends that are waiting for

us just now in dear old England. I look forward," said Frank, with a reverence which for the moment impressed even Dyson's sceptical mind, "to meeting my mother in heaven, thank God, if I don't see her again on earth."

To his surprise, his words seemed to rouse in Dyson a passionate emotion of which Frank had scarcely thought him capable. He flung himself round upon his narrow bed, and uttered an angry oath.

"Curse you and your cant!" he cried. "Curse you if it is true, and if it's false—but more especially if it's true. For then you'll have got the better of me in both ways—in this world and the next. Can't we be equal even in death?"

"What on earth are you talking about, Dyson?"

"You know as well as I do, Frank Lovell, if you're not a fool. What do you suppose has held me off from you a hundred times in the last three years, when you in your cursed good-nature tried to make up to me? Why do you think I've been your enemy—as heaven knows I have—ever since that visit to

Combe? Why, if it were not that I could not get that girl's eyes out of my head—that I would have given my soul to stand in your shoes and be her accepted lover? Never in all my life have I seen a woman that I cared a grain for before I looked into the face of that girl—Nelly Dene.”

Frank was on his feet by this time, and his face was pale. “Enough, Dyson,” he said. “You would not speak in that way to me if you knew the truth—which I never chose to tell you until now. You are speaking of my wife.”

“Your wife!” cried the doctor, springing from the couch, “your wife! You lie! She is not your wife—and never shall be as long as I am alive!”

The two men glared into each other's eyes for a moment, like wild animals about to spring. Frank's fist was even raised and clenched, as if he would have thrust this insult down his opponent's throat. But he mastered himself, and the flush died out of his face, leaving him stern and calm, while Oliver Dyson was still panting and muttering inarticulate words of rage.



"I do not mean to quarrel with you," said Frank, quietly. "We two, left together to see each other die, we of all men need not quarrel. Neither you nor I will ever look upon her face again. She became my wife two days before I sailed, a few hours only after you left the place. I may tell you that your own words helped to bring that result about. When she had discovered what you meant by your allusion to her father's history, she tried to break off her engagement to me, and I then saw that it was better for her to bear my name and feel that she had a protector even while I was away. I got a special licence, and married her next morning."

The flush in Dyson's face had been succeeded by a deadly whiteness; his hands sunk to his sides, his eyes were fixed upon the ground. "Then it is all over!" he said in a low and bitter tone. "She is your wife—your wife, you say. You have the advantage over me in every way. But, at any rate, there is one satisfaction for me—if I am nothing to her, so henceforth will you be. You are dead—dead as if the sods lay upon you, Frank Lovell, in Combe churchyard."

He turned away, and flung himself sullenly on the bed, with his face downward. Frank did not feel it necessary to reply. The words stabbed him with sudden pain ; but after the first sting he simply smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and tried to forget them. It was nearly time for the evening meal, and he silently set about preparing it—a poor meal indeed, as the rations had to be carefully measured out, and were running alarmingly low. Frank looked with dismay at the small amount of food that remained. When these stores were done where were they to find more? In these regions neither bird nor beast was to be seen, and it would be impossible, even when slightly warmer days were coming, to make their way to lands where animal and vegetable life existed. The way was too long and difficult ; they had no boat, and to drag their stores over the icefloe would be a task far beyond their strength.

He offered the food to Dyson, but the doctor made no reply to his words, and pushed his hand away when Frank, half compassionating him, touched him on the arm.

Thus repulsed, Frank shrugged his shoulders and turned aside ; he felt a certain contempt for a man who could give way as Dyson was now doing.

In a short space of time the lamp was extinguished, and both men lay silent and motionless on their respective couches. There, in the silence of the night, despair for the first time seized upon Frank Lovell's mind. Hitherto he had been almost insanely hopeful. He had had tremendous faith in the Captain, and maintained the belief that Peters had some occult and mysterious reason for hoping against hope—that he knew of some mode of relief and escape which he had not chosen to expound even to his first officer. Perhaps there was reason in this ; perhaps Peters would never have brought his men so far without a theory of rescue which he did not care to explain. In any case, the chance of explanation was over ; the great explorer had died and made no sign, and two of his companions—two who claimed no theory or special knowledge of their own—were left behind in a waste of ice and snow, with a limited supply of food,

and no means of leaving the place to which he had brought them—only to die.

Frank thought of all these things, and despair seized upon his heart.

Suddenly, in the complete silence of the night, he heard a sound. There was a foot-fall near him—was Dyson moving? And what was he doing with the box in which, as Frank well knew—

What was it that was kept in that wooden chest? What was the faint click that fell upon his ear? In another moment he was standing erect upon the floor of the hut, and had thrown on the scene the flickering light of one of the few and carefully-hoarded matches which he still possessed. It was a tiny light, but it showed him all he wanted to know. Oliver Dyson had taken a loaded revolver from the box where it was kept, and was in the act of pressing it to his temple. His finger was on the trigger—in another moment it would be too late.

## CHAPTER VI.

### ISHMAEL.

How Frank accomplished his object he hardly knew. The light went out; he clutched fiercely at Dyson's arm, and grappled with him in the darkness. Whether by accident or by design, he knew not, but the pistol went off, and its contents lodged (as they found afterwards) in the ground. Then Dyson seemed to relax his hold; Frank found himself with the pistol in his hand, and in the silence of the wintry night he heard his companion panting for breath, as he sank down on the rough pallet which formed his bed.

Frank spoke without measuring his words. "Coward! do you want to throw up the game in that way?"

Then he heard Dyson sob, and his heart softened.

"God help us, man!" he cried, warmly. "What business have you to shirk your burden? Is your case worse than mine? I shall die and leave a wife at home not knowing what has become of me; yet you would hurry out of the world, as if your fate were worse than mine."

"It is worse than yours," said Dyson, hoarsely. "It has always been worse. You little know what my life has been."

There came more sobs again, tearing, heartrending sobs, terrible to hear. Frank listened, and again his heart grew soft; but then his brow wrinkled and his lips set themselves firmly.

"Too much of this!" he growled to himself. "Be a man, Dyson!" he said, sternly. "Is there any use in crying over one's troubles? Don't be an ass."

As he had conjectured, the sobs were more than half hysterical; and when sharply checked, could be mastered. Dyson choked, gulped once or twice, and slowly recovered himself. But from the stifled sound of his voice, Frank conjectured that his face was still buried in his hands.

"You are hard on me," he said. "You have had little enough trouble in your own life, and you scarcely know what it means. If you did, you would not wonder that I want to get out of it."

"We are both in trouble now," Frank answered, more gently. "I ought to know something about it."

"What you know," said Dyson, almost rudely, "is about equal to the pain of a child with a burnt finger compared to that of a man in the fires of hell."

"That's a pretty strong statement."

"You don't know what my life's been. Look here—I'll tell you something about it. I was a nameless child—buffeted about from place to place, homeless, often hungry, proud as the devil and absolutely penniless—those are my earliest experiences. Are those pleasant to look back upon? My mother drank, and when she was drunk she cursed and abused me. My father—"

Here he stopped short, and waited so long that Frank gave him at last a word of reminder.

"Your father," he said.

"My father," Dyson went on, in a strained, odd kind of voice, "my father was murdered by the man whom you—you have heard of—your wife's father. Murdered in cold blood."

Frank could not restrain a cry, half of indignation, half of amaze.

"It is true—as true as it is that we are here—I can swear to it," said Dyson, with a gasp, "and I knew that she was his daughter all the time. I knew it when I spoke of her history to your sister—aye, and when you first asked me down to Combe."

"Why were you so cruel as to speak of it?"

"Why should I not be cruel? Travis had deceived my mother, that was true, but he had promised to marry her and provide for me. What business had that fool of a Dene to step in and spoil my life for me by taking his? For he did take it—there's no doubt of that, and you know why!"

"I do not know why."

"Because my father had begun to make love to Dene's wife, that was why," said Dyson, sharply. "That was the reason of the quarrel—reason enough too, in all conscience! If you and your friends at innocent-minded



Combe did not know it, everybody else did ! Aye, your wife's aunt, Rachel Dene, knew it well enough, and she always believed in Maurice Dene's guilt. I tell you, Lovell, Dene lay in wait for my father, Major Travis, and shot him down like a dog. I would have done the same in his place, and so would you."

"God forbid !" said Frank, almost involuntarily.

He could feel Dyson's sneer. "You are very pious, but you have blood in your veins for all that. What would you do if someone made love to your Nelly while you were out of the way? Wring his neck, eh? Well, how would you be better than Maurice Dene?"

"We are all human," said Frank, after a little pause, "but if I wanted to punish a man who had wronged me I could do it in fair fight, and not by stealth and at night. And Maurice Dene was a man of honour—"

"He killed my father, whatever he might have been," said Dyson, with the deadly calm of conviction. "And I suffered for it, and my mother suffered for it—tigress though she

was. She died in a pauper lunatic asylum—think of that—at last! You are not old enough to remember a case in the papers—your father may have seen it—where a drunken madwoman broke out and made a disturbance in a wretched London slum, after being supported and cared for and kept quiet for three years by her son, a boy of thirteen? That was my mother—and I was that boy.”

“All the more credit due to you, surely,” said Frank, with grave pity in his tones.

“So the magistrate said,” Dyson answered, mockingly. “And for my reward he took her from me and sent her to the workhouse, where she died in a month. Do you think I thanked him for that? And the newspapers lauded my virtuous actions and got up a subscription for me—how I loathed and hated it all in my heart! I was found to be a clever boy; some newspaper men clubbed together and sent me to school, where I got scholarships and made my way—and here I am, you see, dying in a Polar desert—how much the better for it all?”

“You seem to have little gratitude to the men who did their best to help you?”

"Gratitude! Why should I be grateful? They did it for their own credit's sake, and because the many-headed beast wouldn't be pacified unless something definite were done for the dutiful boy who had earned money for his mother—"

"The general public—which is what you mean by the many-headed beast, I suppose—behaved better to you than you deserved if you speak of it in that way," said Lovell, sternly. "Can you not feel that it was done in kindness, man?"

"I curse their kindness," said Dyson, savagely. "I hate the position in which I was obliged to receive kindness. If my father had lived to do me justice, I should not have needed to render thanks to any man. That I was placed in so vile a position is due to the murderer Dene—your wife's father—the man whom I curse daily for all the misfortunes of my life."

"Scarcely with justice," said Frank. He was almost lost in amazement at this vision of a nature so distorted that even the kindness and generosity of others seemed only an additional injury.

"Yes, with justice," said Dyson, moodily. "For without his interference my wrongs would have been righted, my mother would not have known what it was to want, and I should not have had to cringe and bow down to my benefactors—benefactors! pah!—for a living."

"I don't suppose you cringed much to them."

"Little you know. I wanted an education—I knew I could make my way if I had that—and I had to get it as best I could. I crawled in the dust before those men, hating them all the time, but never forgetful of the aim I had in view. You think that shocking, do you? It's uncommon little you know of real life, Lovell."

"You went to Cambridge, did you not?" said Lovell, avoiding any answer to this last remark.

"Yes, and studied medicine afterwards. I was a fool to go to Cambridge at all. I only did it to please those would-be friends of mine. However, I shook them off completely before I left England; not one of them would speak to me. I had managed"—

with a short, sour laugh—"to quarrel with them all."

"I hardly wonder at it," said Frank, quietly.

"This expedition seemed like a new way of bringing oneself into notice. If I had known it would have ended like this—and I might have known, if I had not been blind; everything I touch fails. I have been the Jonah of this voyage, Lovell. And to add to my misfortunes I must needs fall in love with the girl—the very girl whom decency would have forbidden me to marry, let alone your pretensions to her. I have had the devil's own luck."

"You mean that you could not have thought of her, because she was her father's daughter?"

"Exactly so. Especially as I would kill her father with my own hand if only I could come across him. But I suppose he is dead; he would have been heard of before now if he had been alive. I would have killed him—even before her face—and married her afterwards."

Frank was silent from very disgust. The man whom he had begun at first to pity was alienating all his sympathies. Perhaps Dyson was more struck by his silence than he would have been by words, for presently he added, in a tone where some real emotion seemed to display itself:

"It all sounds bad, I know. But I've never had a chance. I might have been as good a fellow as you, Lovell, if I'd had a home like yours. My hand has been against every man's, and every man's hand against mine."

"It's never too late, Dyson. If, at least, you don't *make* it too late, as you might have done to-night. Why were you so mad? Promise me you won't try it again."

"All right. I'll promise," said Dyson, in a spiritless tone. And then he lapsed into dead silence, and Lovell, drawing his furs more closely round him, hoped that he was asleep, and tried to slumber too.

As if by common consent, the two men avoided any mention next morning of what

had passed between them. Dyson was more sullen and taciturn than usual; but Frank did his best to preserve the customary cheerfulness of his demeanour. The day passed in the ordinary manner; and the night fell; and again a short day dawned; and again came night, and another morning, dimly brighter than the last.

"As far as summer can reach us here, it must be beginning," said Frank to his companion. "It has sometimes seemed to me that we are further south than we imagine. Our reckoning's all wrong—I'm sure of that."

Dyson looked at him moodily. "That may well be." Then in a lower tone—"I saw a bear's traces yesterday."

"And you never told me!" cried Frank in some excitement. "I'll have a go at him to-day. Had you your gun?"

"I had no intentions of trying conclusions with a wild beast," said Dyson, in his sullen tones. "I think I would sooner starve than be eaten by a bear."

Frank laughed good-humouredly, and asked for a description of the marks that

Dyson had seen, and the place where he had seen them.

So much interested was he in this description, and in preparing his equipment for the day, that he did not notice an odd, excited expression in Dyson's eyes, nor some anxiety on Dyson's part to hurry him away. He went off whistling cheerily at last; the prospect of a shot had brought him courage. It was something to know that there was at least a living creature in this wild waste of ice and snow.

When he was gone Dyson seized on a field-glass and swept the horizon, staying it finally at a certain point, on which he gazed fixedly for several moments. When he put down the glass, his face was white, and he stood like a statue for some time—until the moving point that he had seen through the glass came into view of the naked eye. Then he drew a long breath and went into the hut.

Here he did strange things. He seemed bent on obliterating every trace of Frank's presence. He placed various articles of value in his own pockets. He made an



entry in the log-book, which he found in Lovell's chest. And then he sat down quietly, and waited—waited in grim and resolute silence for the relief-party which he believed was drawing near.

. . . . .

Frank Lovell went further afield than he had intended. He found his bear and two fine cubs, and killed the three. Then he came back to the hut—warily, indeed, lest the other parent of the cubs should be on the look-out for him, but with rather a joyful heart, for their presence seemed to him a hopeful augury.

The light was fading fast when he came to the little den which he had learnt to look on as his home. He uttered a shout as he approached it, in order to show Dyson that he was near. There was no answering call, and he made the more haste, therefore, to enter the hut, having before his mind the fear lest his companion should have been tempted in his absence to break the promise he had

made and take his own life with his own hands. He entered the hut hurriedly, and looked around. The smile died from his lips. The hut was empty! Where had Dyson gone?

He came out with a vague idea of searching for him. And then—even in that dim light—he saw strange marks upon the frozen snow. Men had been there—of so much he could be certain, men with sledges and dogs. A relief-party—Englishmen, perhaps! but that did not matter; men who could help them, at least, in their dire need; fellow-men, who could die with them, if they could not save their lives. Frank uttered a sharp cry of joy—and then a moan, for it struck him that the relief-party had not only discovered the hut, but had left it, perhaps not to return. The tracks of the turning sledges could be seen; they had gone back in the direction whence they had come, and not a sign of them remained. But surely—surely, said Frank to himself in sore bewilderment—surely they would return again—for *him*?

He went back into the hut, shaking all over, now that this possibility of escape had occurred to him—and the possibility also of desertion. And then he stood transfixed with horror and amaze. The hut had been rifled of all its most precious possessions. The furs were gone; the ammunition, oil, matches, candles; the stores of food had for the most part disappeared. One or two tins of meat were left, and some mouldy biscuit; but these were all. The log-book was gone. Dyson's clothes and private possessions were gone. Little by little the light burst upon Lovell's mind. Dyson had abandoned him; Dyson had been carried away by the relief-party; and he, Frank Lovell, was left behind to die.

At first he would not believe it. Then he began by degrees to understand. Dyson must have told them that he, the doctor, was the sole survivor of the exploring-party. He must have said that there was no other man living; he had taken the log-book and shown them the entry of every other man's death. Even the handwriting

might not betray him, for, singularly enough, Frank Lovell and Dyson wrote a hand so much alike that one would easily pass for the other, and Lovell had made entries only since the captain's death. Possibly there was an entry now of Frank Lovell's death—days or weeks before. If Dyson were capable of one villainy, why not of another?

But no—no! he would not believe it. He would not believe anything so horrible of the man with whom he had eaten and conversed, and suffered and despaired! Dyson knew how fearful was the thought of dying in that lonely land; he would be the very last person to leave another man to die. He had probably been carried away in the sledges, and they would return next morning to fetch Frank Lovell to a place of comparative safety. The gathering darkness had prevented them from waiting for him any longer, but they would return—it were foul shame to think otherwise. He was ashamed of his own suspicions, which, he said to himself indignantly, would never have been aroused if Dyson had not given

such a bad account of himself. But no man would be such an accursed villain as to save his own life and leave his comrade to die when he could save him also by a word. It was not to be dreamed of—it was impossible. But what a pity that they had not left a written line upon the table to tell Lovell that help was at hand! There was nothing now to be done until the morning; but Frank occupied himself as much as possible in collecting and arranging the few goods that still remained to him. He could not sleep, but indeed he had difficulty in keeping the deadly cold from creeping to his limbs and bringing on the fatal drowsiness from which there might be no waking, for the precious furs and coverings were gone, and he had neither light nor fire! All that he could do was to sit down and patiently wait for morning.

## CHAPTER VII.

### IN THE WILDERNESS.

THE morning came, and gave Frank an opportunity of examining the tracks of feet and sledges ; but it brought no tidings of the rescue-party itself. On the wide, white horizon there was no speck of life, no sign of movement, no vestige of a human form. Frank made a scanty morning meal, and waited and watched again. There was no sign.

Then he resolved to leave his hut and follow the sledge-tracks. "They cannot have brought these sledges very far over this rough snow," he said to himself, as he examined the marks. "That means that their camp or their boats cannot be a great distance off, and that they have returned to them. My best plan will be to follow. I shall probably meet them coming back for me ; or I shall reach them before—before—"

He could not finish his sentence. He could not bear to say, even to himself, that he might have to try to overtake them before they abandoned him for ever to his fate.

He knew that the hut had been constructed at no great distance from a point where Captain Peters had predicted that they might—when summer came—find an open creek of sea-water between two moving packs of ice, and where he conjectured that they might, if only their boats had not been destroyed, find their last chance of a return to the open sea. If they could do this they might yet be saved; for—somewhere—there would be a channel through which escape was possible. Stout arms and skilful appliances might yet gain the day. The expedition had been an entire failure; but Peters had always said that a way of safety would be open if they were able to take advantage of it. Now, it seemed plain that the warmth of even an Arctic summer was opening the frost-bound channels and loosening the tremendous floes, and that the members of some rescue-party, better equipped

than Peters had been, had found their way to the spot where the captain himself had fallen beside his men.

Frank thought all this out, and resolved to follow the tracks, in the hope that they would bring him to the spot where his friends might be found. He set off, keeping the marks well in sight, and recognising with pleasure that here and there the party had stopped upon its way—probably for rest or refreshment. The longer it had delayed, the better was his chance of coming up with it.

But he was weaker than he knew; and the way was long and difficult. Several times he was obliged to stop and rest; the hurry and agitation of his spirits dimmed his sight and slackened his footsteps; he could not make the haste he would.

He saw a black dot or two in the distance at last—dots which seemed to move. There was a dull, dark greyness on the horizon, instead of that long monotony of snow; the sea was shining clearly between great blocks and heaving frozen sheets of ice; and there—there—out in the distance there was the



figure of a ship, with its masts and sails crested with icicles and showing dark against the sky !

Then Lovell cried aloud, and ran forward, as if they could hear his voice. But the black dots in the distance never stopped ; and presently he saw, as in a dream, that they had disappeared from the frozen land, and that something small and dark, which he took to be a boat, appeared at intervals upon the uncertain waves. Finally this too could no longer be seen. By the time he reached the shore—if the edge of that rocking mass of ice could possibly be termed a shore—the ship had stood out to sea ; it was growing smaller and smaller—it had passed on upon its way, and Frank Lovell knew that his chance of escape had gone from him, and that he was left behind to end his life upon that barren shore.

His composure and his endurance deserted him at that point. He sank down upon the ground, sobbing and crying out wildly, then cursing the wickedness and cruelty of the man who had betrayed him, for it seemed to him certain that it was

Dyson who had purposely left him to his doom. He had not desired that Frank Lovell should be saved, and he had told the men that no other member of that ill-fated crew remained behind.

Frank never knew how long he remained on the coast, watching the ship as it faded away into the distance. When all chance was over, and the light was beginning to grow dim, he found himself lying on the snow, cursing his fate, and calling God to put an end to him at once. Then something quieted him; he sat up and looked at the grey sky, and sea, and desolate snow, and thought of his dear old father and mother, and of Nelly, who had been his wife two days before he sailed. He shed tears when he thought of them, and the tears, perhaps, saved his brain, for, afterwards he felt calmer, and turned his steps once more towards the hut, which was his only shelter and his only chance at present of a longer term of life.

He managed to reach it before it was quite dark, and barricaded himself as well as he could into its narrow space; for he remem-

bered the bear, whose mate he had killed the day before, and it seemed to him that he would almost rather die of cold and hunger than by the assault of a dangerous, savage beast. He made himself as warm as he could, and slept a little, for very weariness and sickness of heart.

In the morning he saw that the bear had been patrolling his hut for probably the greater part of the night. He was now, however, beyond the influence of fear, for a cold despair had seized upon him and made him careless of his life. Once or twice he went outside, filled with some sort of nervous conviction that he had heard human voices or steps ; but there was nothing to be seen save the inconceivable desolation of those Arctic solitudes. Even the daylight brought him no cheer ; for the thought that he was quite alone, and that never, so long as he lived, would he look upon a human face again, oppressed him with a maddening sense of isolation. And still there was that one glimmer of hope which still survived—the fancy that the men who had rescued Dyson would return once more for him.

Before noon this glimmering hope was destined to be destroyed.

In his aimless wanderings round the hut, like a wild animal in a cage, he came across something that he had not noticed before. It was a piece of paper, folded into the semblance of a letter, and inscribed with his own name. It seemed to have been placed carefully in a spot where Lovell was not likely to look for it; as if its writer had desired that some little space of time should elapse before it was found. It bore no signature, but Frank knew Dyson's handwriting well enough, and fell hungrily upon the letter.

"I write a few words"—thus ran the communication—"in order that you may not buoy yourself up with false hopes after I am gone. I see the relief-party approaching, and—unless you come back sooner than I expect—I shall give them no information concerning you. If you ever read this, you will know that I have succeeded in my scheme. I will bear back to England the news of the *Triton's* failure, and of the death of the men who sailed in her. I have taken one or two papers of yours, and a ring which I found in

your box, and will convey them safely to your wife. She will be glad to see me *now*. I shall be able to put an end to her suspense, and leave her in no doubt concerning the fate which has overtaken you."

The fiendish malice of this letter struck Frank with despair. "Can any man be so vile?" he said, looking upward as if in impotent appeal to heaven. "And is he saved while I am left to perish? Oh, my God, hast Thou indeed forgotten me?"

A period of madness came over him, or rather, a delirium in which he knew not what he said or did. He raved, he cursed, he wept; he beat his head like a madman upon the floor. He might have been saved—he might have gone home to his sorrowing wife and parents—but for the villainy of this one man! And such things were permitted by the silent heaven! It was enough to turn a strong man's brain.

Henceforth his hours were spent in trances of waking or sleeping horror. Fever had come upon him, and the alternate weakness and strength of fever; he knew no longer where he was, nor what he was doing.

Visions of death and horrible murder came upon him at first ; but, as he grew weaker, they were succeeded by dreams, in which there was a faint kind of repose and pleasantness. But these were followed by horrible wakings, and were almost more to be dreaded than the darker imaginings of his fevered brain. In a lucid interval now and then he drank a good deal, and even tried to eat ; but he loathed food, especially of the kind that was left him. It began to dawn on him in a misty way that death was near at hand ; and he was glad of it ; for to die in the throes of illness such as this was better than to starve by inches, or to be clawed by a wild beast. He was not sorry to go, now that all hope was over ; and he tried to say a prayer for himself and for the dear ones that he had left behind.

Something like a feeling of pity for the man who had virtually murdered him came across him when he felt that death was so near ; for at that moment the relative importance of life and death, of goodness and ill-doing, became very clear to him ; and he

knew that his cause was in God's hands. If watchers had been near him they would have heard him murmur words like these : "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord : I will repay." It was a reminiscence of the old days at home, when his father had read from the great family Bible at prayers, or Frank himself, in surplice and cassock, had given forth the lessons from the brass eagle-lectern in the village church. "I have no need to trouble myself—God will repay. I can almost pity him. . . I can almost forgive him when I think of that.

"'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive'—yes, yes, I will try ; but oh, my God, it is very hard."

Then he lay, muttering prayers sometimes, and sometimes curses, but never knowing what he said ; until at last, one day the dimness apparently cleared away from his brain, and he became possessed with a purpose which seemed to him perfectly reasonable, but was in very truth only the token of a mind distraught. It appeared to him that Nelly had come to his side, and told him to get up and go across the ice-floe to a spot where a ship

was waiting to take him home ; and that she would come with him and lead him in the right way. So, although he knew that she was not there when he opened his eyes and gazed dreamily around him, he was quite convinced that she was only waiting for him outside, and that he must get up and go with her at once.

Full of this idea, he stumbled out of the hut into the open air, and it seemed to his poor, weak brain that someone took his hand and led him forward. He could not exactly tell who that someone was, but he was nearly sure that it was Nelly. On and on he went, in spite of failing limbs and panting breath ; but, much as he suffered, it seemed to him that he could not stop. He must go on until he saw the sea, and the ship that was waiting to bear him back to England and to Nelly. For though Nelly was with him (in his insane imaginings) she was also at home in England ; and he had not the slightest difficulty in reconciling these two statements to his own mind.

But when he left the hut, he had not turned in the direction of the sea-water at



all. He had gone on northward, over the pack—gone forward to meet that barrier of impenetrable ice ; to storm, perchance, that stern and impregnable fortress of the North to which no Arctic explorer has ever found the key. No one will ever know what length of time he spent in toiling, fever-stricken and delirious, over those frozen solitudes. No one will ever track his footsteps and know the way he went. For only to a man upheld by the strength of madness, and impervious to hunger and to cold, would it have appeared possible to surmount the difficulties and avoid the perils of that terrible Road of Death. And a moment came when the strength of fever left him, and the weakness of his bodily state overpowered even the clearness of his delusions. Then he sank down in the snow ; and for one moment his brain cleared, and he thought of Nelly in her rose-covered cottage at Combe, and prayed God that he might meet her one day in heaven.


. . . . .  
Was he dead, or was he only dreaming,

when he first opened his eyes again? The sufferings of the past months seemed years away. He had suffered more than ever since he fell senseless in the snow—of that he was certain; but how, and why, he could not understand. He had had peaceful dreams; he had endured the pains of hell; and yet this was the extraordinary part of it—he was now quite free from pain of any kind. He felt an extreme weakness and languor, and so much indisposition to exert himself, that he gave up thinking and questioning for the time being, and said to himself, vaguely, that he supposed he was dead. Or, if he were not dead, that the whole of his past experiences had been a dream. Else, how could he ever have escaped from that terrible Arctic solitude, and from the horrors of death by fever and starvation? He must be dead—and with that fancy he fell asleep, with a slight smile upon his lips.

His brain was clearer when he woke again; and he was able to use his eyes to more advantage, with the result that he concluded himself to be not dead, but

very much alive, although in a country that was unknown to him.

He was lying on a bed of dressed skins, laid over dried heather or some plant of the kind. There was no linen to be seen, but a coarse curtain of rough woven fibre, looking as if it had been made out of the bark of a tree, hung over a hole in the wall, which he rightly conjectured to be a window. The room seemed to be built of stones, plastered with dried mud; the floor was also of dried earth, and the furniture and utensils were of the roughest and rudest description. Frank cudgelled his brains in vain to know in what country and amongst what people he could be; the nearest approach to the truth that he could get at was a conjecture concerning some remote tribe of Eskimos; but there were points of difference between this hut and any that he had seen and heard of. His quick eye told him that the building had been erected by people of higher intelligence than that of the Eskimos; and when he had once arrived at this conclusion, he looked round with redoubled interest



for further information. And as he moved on his couch, a dog, which he had not at first perceived, rose from his post at the foot of the bed, and came up to him, wagging his tail, and making signs of friendship. He was a yellow dog, of no breed that Frank knew anything about; but he had so much intelligence in his yellow-brown eyes, and moved his bushy tail about with such vehement delight, that Frank feebly addressed him as "Good dog," and held out his hand to be licked.

Thereupon, the dog—being quite as sensible as many a sick-nurse—lifted up his voice and barked. And as Frank wondered what he meant by this demonstration, he heard a step at the door, and saw by the demeanour of the good creature that he had barked as a signal, and in order to summon his master.

The man who entered, and advanced to his bedside, was of a wild and savage appearance at first sight, although a second glance revealed the fact that his figure was noble and his face not devoid of benevolence. But his dress was composed entirely of skins;

several weapons were thrust into his belt ; and his long grey beard was of such length that years must have elapsed since last it had been trimmed. He seemed to be sixty years of age, or even more, and his countenance was much furrowed ; but his movements were active like those of a younger man, and Frank conjectured that he was less elderly than he appeared. His face was grave, sad, thoughtful, and full of intelligence ; but there was a look in his eyes which Lovell felt that he did not understand—a certain remoteness, even a sort of wildness, as if some hidden spring of sanity were wanting. Yet this expression was so definitely contradicted by the calmness of the rest of his face that Frank soon forgot it, or thought that he had been mistaken.

The old man came to Frank, and gave him a cordial drink which he had brought with him. Then he spoke—and to Frank's amaze—he spoke in English.

“Drink,” he said ; “drink and rest. You can do nothing better. You will soon be well.”

“You speak English ! You are an Eng-

lishman!" cried Frank, as emphatically as his weakness would allow. "Then will you tell me, sir, where I am, and how came I to be here?"

The old man's lips stirred with something like a smile, and there was a singular kindness in his grave dark eyes as he looked down at Frank for a moment without replying.

"You are in good hands," he said at last, "and you shall be as well cared for as the poor resources of the place will allow. As to how you came hither, my young friend, you must wait until you are a little stronger, and then I will tell you. The place that you are in?—well, it has no name upon any map with which you are acquainted, but you may think of it by the name which I gave it many years ago. This is the City of Bezer, which was said of old to be in the wilderness. Now sleep, young man, and when you are rested and refreshed I will tell you more."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE KING OF BEZER.

THE old man's answer did not satisfy Frank Lovell's mind ; indeed, it excited his curiosity and some little uneasiness. "Is the old fellow a madman?" he asked himself. "The City of Bezer—I never heard of any such place ; yet, somehow, it has a familiar sound—like a Bible name. 'In the wilderness'—now what on earth does he mean by that?"

But the effort to remember was too much for him in his weak state ; he put his head down on the pillow, and fell fast asleep, which, as the old man had said, was the best thing that he could do.

After this return to consciousness, he recovered rapidly ; but, as memory began its work, he grew more and more puzzled as to the place in which he found himself, for it

was like no other country that he had ever seen. He conjectured that he might have been taken in an unconscious state to some outlying corner of Greenland or Spitzbergen. He was evidently very far north, and it was the height of summer, for the sun never went down, but flamed all day round the encircling horizon of snow-covered hills; and, strange to say, there was no salt water in sight, nor anything to show that they were within many miles of the sea.

When Frank was allowed to issue from the old stone hut or cottage in which his host resided, he saw that it stood in the centre of a great grassy plain, dotted here and there with clumps of stunted vegetation, and diversified by enclosures where it seemed that some sort of vegetables could be grown. Just now the sun had considerable power, and the gardens were full of small sweet strawberries and other fruits, which were as nectar and ambrosia to Frank, who had been so long deprived of fresh food. In the distance snow-covered peaks could be seen, completely surrounding the valley, through which, moreover, flowed a broad dark stream



of water, which showed by its turbidity that it was fed by the melting snows of the hills whence it came. It seemed to flow straight across the valley and to leave it by a cleft in the mountains on the other side, and although there was no bridge across it, there were various tiny crafts moored to the banks, which showed that the inhabitants of the place could cross from one side to the other.

Inhabitants? And where were they? For during the period of Frank's illness he had seen no one but the old man who had tended him. He had known in a vague way that other steps and other voices had sounded on his ears; but until he was strong enough to be set down, on a couch made of bear-skins, in the open air, he had not had the energy to inquire about them. Now he turned to his host, as he rightly considered him, and asked:

"What people live here?"

"*My* people," said the old man, with a curiously king-like air. He waved his hand westwards—the quarter to which Lovell's back was turned. "They live there," he

said, "like rabbits in a warren. You may see them if you look."

Frank turned and looked. He saw a number of circular mud-huts, rising not more than four feet above the ground, and so like it in colour that it was scarcely easy to distinguish them at any distance. But, at the holes that served for doors, he saw some short, squat figures going in and out, and smaller creatures—children, he judged them—who lay in the sun and played with the docile yellow dogs which formed one of the chief features of the place.

"They are Eskimos?" he said presently.

"They are of that race, I believe; but different in many respects. Shall I call one up, so that you may see him closer?"

"Thank you," said Lovell. Forthwith the old man uttered a peculiar call, at the sound of which two figures came running towards him. They were dressed in rough leggings and close tunics of dried skins; their hair was lank and black, their eyes were small, and set at a curious angle in their pale faces; their mouths wide and full. There was no look of special intelligence

in their faces, but they seemed affectionate and easily pleased, for they smiled from ear to ear, made loving noises when the old man spoke to them, and finally prostrated themselves and kissed the hem of his garment and his feet.

"They seem devoted to you," said Frank.

"I am their king," the old man answered, simply. Then he uttered a few words to the natives, which Frank, of course, could not understand, but which produced the effect of making them prostrate themselves before Lovell and kiss his boots as they had done to the tanned moccasins worn by their English king. Lovell flushed with a little embarrassment and discomfort, but the old man said quietly :

"It is all right. That is their way of swearing fealty to you. They will be friends to you for ever now ; and they are the head men of their tribe."

"I should very much like to know, sir, if it is not an indiscreet question," said Frank, "in what country I now find myself, and how I came here?"

The "king," as he had dubbed himself,

looked at him for a moment in silence. "I have told you," he said at last, deliberately, "that this place is called Bezer. Ask any of these men, my servants, and they will tell you the same. If you do not know where Bezer is"—with a short laugh—"I am not responsible for your ignorance."

"Tell me, at least," said Frank, "whether it is in Europe or in Asia—"

"That is a question, young man, which at present I cannot answer."

Was he mad? Frank stared at him in utter amaze. The King of Bezer smiled gently; he saw the doubt in his visitor's mind.

"I assure you," he said, "that I speak advisedly. I will explain the matter to you by and by, when I see fit. Now, as to your coming hither, you must have wandered for many miles; you came probably from some English ship or camp of explorers?"

Frank replied by mentioning the *Triton*, Captain Peters, and the unsuccessful expedition, but did not go into details concerning the manner in which he had been left behind. He said only that he had believed himself to

be the only man left alive in those regions, and that distress of mind and privation had brought on a fever, in which he seemed to have wandered a great distance without consciousness of his own plight.

"You must indeed have wandered for very many miles," said his host, gravely. "Your constitution must be of iron, or you would never have survived it. Indeed, I had great doubts as to whether you would get over your illness."

"Did I wander into this green valley, then? Did I get back to solid land without knowing it? Or have I chanced on an island—?"

"It is an island, in a sense," said the old man, decisively. "You reached yonder mountains, and fell upon them utterly exhausted. In the summer months I am sometimes tempted to follow the traces of wild animals along the passes; and there, in a singularly dangerous situation, I found you. You were lying insensible, with head hanging over a precipice, and it was a work of considerable difficulty to rescue you. If you had been in your senses, sir, you would never have got so

far. In a sense, it was your delirium that saved you. I and my trusty servants brought you hither; and I am happy to have been the means of restoring you to life and—I trust—to health.”

“I assure you, sir, that I am deeply grateful,” said Frank, earnestly. “And the country to which I have come—?”

His host looked at him keenly. “You are eager on that point,” he said, slowly. “And yet—yet—you may not yet believe my conclusions, though I would stake my existence on their correctness. Young man—*young man*—” (with gathering agitation) “I warn you not to contradict me—not to deride me; I would stake my life, I say, on the truth of what I am about to tell you now.”

Frank vowed, with solemn earnestness, that he would receive the communication, whatever it might be, in a becoming spirit of faith and humility. He was growing curious and excited. At the same time, the thought crossed his mind once more that the old man was perhaps not in his right senses—certainly his eyes were

a little wild, and his manner anything but serene.

"Tell me your name first, that I may know who is the Englishman who will take back to the world the news of this place in which I live."

"My name is Frank Lovell."

"Lovell! Lovell! Not of—Combe?"

"Yes, sir, of Combe."

"Where Edmund Lovell is incumbent? Lovell—once of Wyndham Court?"

It sounded strange to hear familiar names so far away from home. Frank assented, and also stared. "You knew my father?" he said, eagerly.

"I knew him—once." The old man stopped and sighed. "I could not wish for better fortune than to have his son here, and to tell to him a secret which all the world has so long desired to know."

Again Frank wondered whether his host was crazy, but he was too bewildered to open his mouth, and after a little silence the King of Bezer proceeded, with a certain dignity of manner which struck the young man as peculiar.

"I shall never have the credit of what I have discovered; but I am glad that the secret will not die with me. As you formed one of an exploring-party, you have doubtless read accounts of the various theories that geographers and men of science have formed respecting the North Pole, the currents that may lead to it, the nature of its climate, and so on. I need not trouble you by recording these. There is only one that has any interest for us at present. It is one of their theories—I remember hearing it discussed many years ago—that there may be at the North Pole of the earth a depression in the surface, and consequent changes of climate and of temperature."

"I have heard of it," said Frank.

"I am too far removed from civilisation to have the subject at my fingers' ends, but I believe that this is what they say." And, to Frank's amaze, his host plunged into a mass of detail, a maze of figures, and calculations, and theorems, which showed that he had given a vast amount of thought to the subject. It is needless to recapitulate his statements or his arguments, for reasons which will be



given to the reader later on; it is only necessary to remark that they produced a great impression upon Frank Lovell, and led him to say when finally the King of Bezer paused :

"It seems a very plausible theory, sir. Have you found any means of determining whether it is a true one?"

The old man smiled. "The proof is here before us," he said, quietly. "Look around you, my good friend. Do you see where you are? You can take an observation for yourself, and you will soon find out. Yonder ring of mountains—much further away than they seem, I may observe—form the outer ring to the basin or depression in which we now find ourselves. The alteration in temperature, the mildness of the climate, the immunity from storms which we enjoy, are facts that have been well imagined or prognosticated by scientific men. We are at the place which men have died in trying to find—at the centre of the labyrinth; we hold the key of the frozen North, the mystery of the Pole in our right hands."

His dark eyes shone with enthusiasm ;

he stood erect, pointing to the distant hills, and his long grey beard waved in the mild breeze as he spoke.

"You mean to say," said Frank at last, "that we stand—we stand—"

He could not finish the sentence. The mystery of centuries seemed to weigh down his tongue. He shrank back appalled and almost disbelieving at the greatness of the discovery which had been made. But the old man had grown accustomed to the idea, and smiled, well pleased at the effect which he had produced.

"We are at the North Pole itself," he said. "Go back to England and tell them what it is like."

"Why have you not gone yourself?" cried Frank, in some excitement. "How is it that you have denied yourself that triumph? It is yours by right."

His host frowned, and looked darkly at him. "You ask a question which it is not necessary for me to answer," he said; "yet, nevertheless, I will answer it—in my own way. I keep the secret of this place, young sir, for the reason of its name—

because I may not leave this city of refuge—this Bezer of mine which is in the wilderness ; a wilderness indeed.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Frank in some vexation. “I had no desire to ask questions which you do not wish to answer.”

“I have answered, but you do not understand.”

“No,” Lovell responded, dryly ; “I do *not* understand.”

“One moment,” said his host. “Give me a little patience, and I promise you that you shall understand me. Yes”—as Frank made a protest—“I choose to explain. It will be some time before you can leave this place, and I will not force my company upon you under false pretences. When you have heard something of my story, it will then be for you to decide how to treat me. I am safe here ; but if you bid me return with you to the world, I will return.”

So saying, he turned on his heel and walked towards the house, leaving Frank in a perfect tumult of perplexity, excitement—perhaps even a little alarm, for there was

no doubt now in his mind the man was mad—every word showed it ; and yet he must be Lovell's only companion until some way of escape from this strange country could be devised. North Pole or not, Frank wished himself safe out of it ! In a foreign land, cut off apparently from any means of returning to England, and with a raving lunatic for his companion, his position was not an enviable one.

The King of Bezer, as he styled himself, was soon seen returning from the house ; and in his hand he carried a little black book, very much worn at the edges, as if from constant use. Frank glanced at it curiously when the old man drew near. The book was a Bible, and it fell open—almost of itself—at a certain place, as if that portion had been studied more than any other.

The old man took up his position opposite Frank's couch, with an aspect of unaffected dignity. His grey hair floating in the wind, his venerable beard, his strange garments of skins, gave him the appearance, Frank thought, of some old-time fanatic, or some weird prophet of a long-dead past, preaching

his faith to a world that would not hear. He lifted his book a little, and read aloud in a deep sonorous voice :

“ ‘Thou shalt separate three cities for thee in the midst of thy land . . . that every slayer may flee thither.

“ ‘And this is the case of the slayer, which shall flee thither, that he may live; whoso killeth his neighbour ignorantly, whom he hated not in time past ;

“ ‘As when a man goeth into the wood with his neighbour to hew wood, and his hand fetcheth a stroke with the axe to cut down the tree, and the head slippeth from the helve, and lighteth upon his neighbour, that he die; he shall flee unto one of these cities and live :

“ ‘Lest the avenger of the blood pursue the slayer, while his heart is hot, and overtake him, because the way is long, and slay him; whereas he was not worthy of death. . . .’ ”

Then turning over a page or two backwards, he also read :

“ . . . ‘And that fleeing unto one of these cities he might live ;

“‘Namely, *Bezer in the wilderness*, in the plain country. . . .’

“Therefore, you see, young man,” said the reader, abruptly closing his book, “why I have called this place Bezer—a city of refuge in the wilderness—to one who has killed his neighbour ignorantly, and is not worthy of death.”

Frank, raising himself on his elbow, looked at him intently, and a great red flush mounted to the very roots of his hair.

“Is it possible,” he said, in a quick, agitated tone, “that I have found one whom I would give half the world to find—who has been sought in vain these twenty years?”

The King of Bezer closed his book and surveyed the young man with a calmly resolute air. “You come,” he said, composedly, “as the avenger of blood?”

“I? Not I!” cried Frank, feeling an inclination half to laugh and half to cry. “I come as a friend—as the husband of one who ought to be dear to you—if you are the man I think—”

“Whether I am or not,” said his host, “will

perhaps be made clearer to you when I mention my name. Has your father never spoken to you of Maurice Dene?"

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE STORY OF MAURICE DENE.

FOR a moment or two the world seemed to go round before Frank Lovell's eyes. He hardly knew what he said. "You! You—Maurice Dene!" he gasped. And then the mist cleared away, and he saw the old man still standing with the Bible in his hand, looking down at him with grave benevolence. How was it that he had not seen a likeness to Nelly in that finely-featured face, a touch of Nelly's sweetness in her father's eyes?

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, trying to recover himself, but not quite succeeding, "but I was taken by surprise. I knew you by name quite well—very well indeed." Maurice Dene's face changed a little, but he did not interrupt the speaker. "I must introduce myself to you as—your son-in-law—



if you are indeed my father's friend, Maurice Dene."

"My son-in-law?"—Frank's host seemed to consider. "There was a child, then?" he said, interrogatively. "A child? A girl? Ah! I thought that she died with her mother."

"No; she was brought up at Combe by Miss Rachel Dene, your sister."

"Poor Rachel! She was a good sister to me in her way," said Maurice Dene, grasping his beard reflectively, "though she always judged me at my worst. I would wager anything that she has thought me guilty of deliberate murder all these years? Eh? Tell me, has she not?"

Frank answered by a falter: he was taken aback by such a question.

"And you yourself?" said Nelly's father, surveying him keenly. "You have adopted her views, no doubt? And she has brought up the girl—my daughter—to think of me as a murderer."

"No, sir; no, indeed," cried Frank, earnestly. "My father was your old friend, and *he* never thought you guilty. He told

me the story as far as he knew it, and he assured me—and Nelly too—that although the affair was a mystery, he was certain of one thing, that you would never do anything dishonourable. And we believed him, sir.”

He struggled to his feet, although he was still almost too weak to stand, and offered Maurice Dene his hand, which was instantly clasped, and held for a moment in solemn silence. “I would not take your hand,” said Dene, gently, “if it were stained with blood that I had shed of my own free will. I am not guilty of murder, young man, although I once took life away. You shall hear the whole story, and judge for yourself. Long ago I pronounced myself innocent; and I have had time for reflection; for many years have passed since I made for myself this city of refuge, and I have grown old since I came.”

Looking at his face, Frank saw that the man was not really old. He could not have been more than forty-five, and his whole frame showed him still to be in the prime of life; but his hair had turned grey at a very early period, and made him look

much more aged than his years. His face was also deeply furrowed, and wore an expression of long-continued sorrow and fatigue.

"I shall be glad to hear anything you like to tell me, sir," he said.

"In time—in time—yes, I will tell you everything in time. Lie down again, my son—you are my son if you have married the child—my Eleanor's child; tell me about her first. They called her Nelly, did they? It was what they called her mother in the old days."

He seated himself beside Frank, whom he had carefully assisted back to his couch of bear-skins, and there, with elbow on knee, and hand twisted in his beard, he listened, dreamily, while the young man spoke. At first Frank was a little embarrassed, and scarcely knew what to say; but by and by Nature burst through the long restraint of necessary silence, and he relieved his full heart by giving Maurice Dene an account of his love for Nelly, of the way in which they had grown up together, and of his marriage two days before he sailed. The father listened almost in silence; now and

then he put a question, or made some quiet exclamation of surprise or of approval ; but at last, when Frank paused—having brought his story up to the day of his departure in the *Triton*—he remarked :

“ There is one thing that I hardly understand. What brought your father to this remarkable decision—for it seems remarkable to me—this decision to allow you two young people to bind yourselves together just before you started on a presumably long and dangerous expedition ? ”

Frank blushed a little as he repeated the commonplaces with which the world had been satisfied.

“ Ah, but there was another reason,” said Maurice Dene, his dark eye bright as a hawk’s. “ Go on ; what was it ? Something to do with me ! ”

Frank yielded to the pressure ; and told him, with a blush, that it had come about because Nelly had wanted to break her engagement when she had heard cruel things said about her father.

“ And who said them ? ” was the next question.

"A young doctor ; he was staying with us at the vicarage ; he came on this expedition with me afterwards."

"His name ?"


"Oliver Dyson."

"I do not know it. What reason could he have for speaking cruelly of me ? How did he know my story ? Of course, it was well known at the time ; but he—a young man—he could not remember it— Had he," said Maurice Dene, fixing a scrutinising eye upon Frank's perplexed countenance, "had he anything to do with the man Travis, whom I am accused of having murdered ?"

"He was Major Travis's son," said Frank, in a very low tone.

The King of Bezer started and drew back, with a change of colour and expression which took Frank by surprise.

"The Avenger of Blood," he said, in a scarcely audible voice ; and then he got up and walked to and fro for a little time, muttering to himself now and then, as if he had forgotten the presence of an observer. After a time, however, he seemed to collect himself, and came back to Frank's side.



"You have disturbed me a little," he said, "by what you have told me ; but, nevertheless, it had to be told, and I am grateful for your confidence. At some other time I will tell you the story of Major Travis's death. Not now—just now I am too much disturbed."

Frank attempted some excuse for having agitated him, but the elder man put his words aside with a wave of the hand. "Some other time," he said. "We shall have plenty of leisure. It would be better for you now to go back to the house ; the wind blows chill from the mountains. Lean on my arm."

He helped the young man into the room which had been given to him, and then left him alone ; nor did Frank see him again for many hours. In the absence of his host, he lay on his bed and speculated on the strangeness of the chance which had brought him to the very spot where Maurice Dene was living. As to the old man's theories respecting the North Pole, he put them out of his mind for the present. They might or might not be correct, and he would be able to form his own conclusions by and

by when he had more time for observations. But what now struck him was the peculiarity of Maurice Dene's state of mind; the curious name which he had given to his place of abode; and the story of his disappearance, which Frank was longing to hear. He also thought with anxiety of the ways and means by which he could escape from the place; there must surely, he thought, be a way of passing beyond the mountains either to the coast of Europe or Asia; and if Maurice Dene possessed a chart, he might be able to get back to England even before the end of the summer.

He was fairly comfortable in his present lodging. Mr. Dene had given him his own bedroom, and was himself living in the outer apartment or living-room. Frank discovered this fact only as he grew stronger, and wanted to alter the arrangement at once; but his host quietly insisted on the observance of his own plan. The King of Bezer was waited on by three or four of the natives, who seemed altogether devoted to him. Their intelligence was not at a very high level, but their reverence and affection

for him were unbounded. Frank tried at various times to find out whether they had any sense of religion, and discovered a small temple or chapel, where Maurice Dene had erected a large wooden cross, and where he sometimes addressed the people in their own language; but Frank gradually arrived at the opinion that they looked upon their king as a divine being, and had no notion of any other deity, unless it were the sun, on which they bestowed much honour, greeting its appearance with obeisances, and carrying wreaths to the place where its gleams first penetrated the valley through a gap in the surrounding hills. He thought that he observed some faint traces of the worship of Odin and Thor, but of this he could not be certain, though it was, perhaps, as probable as any other theory would have been, for how should this quaint little tribe be there at all if their ancestors had not, some time or other, pushed north with their dogs and herds, and carried with them some relics of the only religion that they knew?

There was a small breed of reindeer, which were of infinite service to the natives,



and there were the yellow dogs. These were the only four-footed creatures in the place. There were, however, a good many birds of different kinds, and Frank thought, from what he saw, that there must have been a time—many centuries ago—when the country was warmer than it was at present, a theory which would account for the success of the original colonisers in penetrating to so northerly a spot. Now they were shut in by an apparently impregnable belt of ice and snow—to say nothing of the mountains which hemmed them in on every side—and, probably, many hundred years had passed since they had had a visitor from the outer world. Maurice Dene was the first Englishman who had ever trodden this hidden spot—this islet of the Arctic seas. Frank Lovell was the second; but would there ever be a third?

So Frank mused, in the lack of occupation; for certainly there was not very much to do in this outlandish country. Maurice Dene had one book only—the Bible, from which he had read—and this he kept for his own use. There were, however, writing

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materials in the house, and Lovell employed himself after a time in writing an account of his voyage, and a diary of his present life. He did not expect to be able to take them home with him, but, at any rate, they gave him something to do.

Three weeks of this sort of life passed before Maurice Dene again opened his lips to utter more than commonplaces. At last, as the two men sat together one night before a blazing peat fire (for there were great peat-bogs at a spot not far from Dene's house), the elder man said suddenly :

"I have a story to tell you. Will you hear it now?"

"Willingly."

"Remember that what I tell you is the exact truth. I will swear it if you like."

"No!" said Frank, almost indignantly, "I take your word—as a gentleman."

Maurice Dene gave him a pleased, softened glance from beneath his shaggy grey eyebrows, but did not make any immediate reply.

"My story is not a long one," he said, after a short pause. "I must apologise for troubling

you with details which you may have heard before. You know that I married young, when I was only one-and-twenty, and Eleanor was eighteen? She was very beautiful. You tell me my daughter is said to be like her. It may be so, but she can hardly be so lovely as her mother was; however, you are not likely to agree with me.

“We had been married two years before there was any likelihood of children. Eleanor was a delicate woman—often ailing; and as I was then stationed at Portsmouth, which did not agree with her, I sent her away to the seaside when she required special care. Rachel was with her, and I knew that she would be well looked after. They went to Combe—chiefly because my old friend and tutor, Edmund Lovell, was vicar of the parish.

“It was during Eleanor’s absence from me that I became aware of a scandalous report concerning her life before marriage. Of course I knew that it was a lie—that goes without saying; but I took some trouble to trace it to its source, so that I might punish its author. I tracked it down at last. There

was a Major Travis, with whom I was already on bad terms; he was a middle-aged, dissipated man, thoroughly bad at core, with several dark stories hanging over his head. It was he, I discovered—no matter how—who had first paid his addresses to Eleanor before her marriage with me, in spite of the fact that he was well known to be living with a woman who had borne him more than one child, and was reputed to be passionately attached to him. And yet he wanted to marry Eleanor—the sweetest, purest, truest woman that ever trod God's earth! She refused him, of course; and he never forgave her the refusal—accompanied, as it was, by some words of scorn for the life he led. Well, after her marriage, the fellow began to persecute her in every possible way. At first he tried to make love to her; and when he found that this was useless, he used to send me anonymous letters, and propagated every kind of vile slander against her. It was long before I found out the traducer of my wife's fair name; but at last I did, or rather my faithful servant and friend Larry Moore found it out for me, through

making acquaintance with one of Travis's servants, I believe.

"Well—what would you have done, Frank Lovell, in my case? I had just discovered the truth when I came upon the man in a public place. They may have told you that it was some dispute about a horse—cards—anything but the truth; for I carefully guarded my Nelly's name. I struck him in the face, and would have given him a thorough horse-whipping there and then, as he deserved, if friends and acquaintances had not interfered and separated us by force. But we knew that we should meet again.

"I swear to you, boy, that I did not wish to kill the man. I wanted to punish him—that was true. But after the first headlong burst of passion, I thought of him as of a mean hound that I would soundly chastise and kick out of my path. But murder was not in my thoughts—I swear it was not.

"I had been forcibly separated from him, as I said, and had been convoyed home by my friends, vowing vengeance on my

enemy in my rage. The words I uttered were bitterly brought home to me afterwards. When all the world was asleep that night—I was too restless and miserable to remain in the house any longer—I got up and went out, to get a headache blown away by the fresh breeze. I went over the common, thinking to get loneliness and peace for a bit—not even knowing until afterwards that my man, Larry, had followed me. *He* was anxious, it seems, as to what I was going to do. And, no doubt, his anxiety seemed justified when I came suddenly face to face with Major Travis. Not one man in ten thousand would have believed the encounter to be accidental.”


“But it *was* accidental?”

“Purely accidental. We stopped short, face to face; and we uttered some hard words. I was unarmed; but I remember I threatened to thrash him, and struck him in the mouth. For answer he produced a pistol, and bade me keep my distance. My blood was up. I threw myself upon him, trying to seize the weapon, though I did not mean to make use of it myself, but I was

utterly blind to the danger, and—how I know not—the pistol exploded, and Travis sank to the ground dead as a stone. I was the indirect cause of his death; and yet, Frank Lovell, I refuse to call myself a murderer.”

“You were no murderer, sir,” said Lovell, in a hushed voice. He thought of the scene in the hut, when Oliver Dyson had tried to shoot himself, and he had forcibly wrenched away the pistol from him. How easily might the thing that had happened to Maurice Dene have happened to himself! And how, then, could he do anything but pity the man who had been, how indirectly soever, the cause of Travis’s death?

“He had struck me before the pistol went off,” said Maurice Dene, musingly, “and I tripped and fell. I think I saw what had happened, however, before I fell, but my recollections of that time are dark and confused. I suppose I fainted then, for Larry Moore found me insensible. Some injury had been inflicted on my head, either by the fall or by Travis’s blow. I did not come to myself for five whole days; and then—”



"Yes, sir, then?" said Frank with uncontrollable eagerness.

"*Then* I was lying in a hammock on board a coasting vessel, owned by a friend of my man Larry. The poor fellow had actually taken me in his arms and carried me away from the spot where Travis was lying dead, had got me on board his friend's schooner, and was ready to go with me to the end of the world in order that I might escape. For—like so many of my friends—he thought me guilty."

"But when you came to yourself—"

"Then I insisted on being put ashore; and they landed me finally at the nearest landing place, which happened to be a fishing village on the French coast; and there I heard the news—the terrible news of what had happened while I was away. My wife was dead; my reputation was gone for ever. There was a warrant out against me for the wilful murder of Oliver Travis; and, as far as I was concerned, I had no care whether I should live or die."



## CHAPTER X.

### WARNING.

THERE was silence for a few minutes. Maurice Dene seemed absorbed in the recollection of the past ; and Frank would not disturb his meditations. Presently, however, the elder man roused himself and continued with a sigh :

“The shock was too much for me. I lay for weeks between life and death at the inn in that obscure little village, watched and tended by Moore like a brother. When slowly and reluctantly I came back to consciousness it was he who persuaded me that I could not return to England. Indeed, it would have gone hard with me if I had ; for public opinion was against me, and my long absence had condemned me in all eyes. Moore implored me not to risk my life ; and

even declared that if I went back he would accuse himself of the murder—generous fellow that he was! All the more generous because—at first, at least—he did not believe me morally innocent. But I convinced him before he died.”

“Did he die before you came here?”

“Yes. We wandered about from place to place, going through many adventures which would hardly interest you. We went to South America, Australia, Japan, Tibet—to some places almost untrodden by the foot of any Englishman but our own. It was in Siberia that I lost Larry Moore. A gang of thieves murdered him—they are a blood-thirsty set—and put me into an open boat on the sea. That was how I came here, young man, for I thought myself abandoned by God and man, and took no pains to save myself; but I had some provisions in the boat, and a cloak, and—God guided me. I must have got into a warm current, for I knew the cold was less on that side than it was reported to be on the European quarter. At any rate, I made my way hither, after extraordinary dangers and difficulties; and

here I live, as you see, and hold the Northern Mystery in my hands."

There was again a silence. Then Frank spoke, in a low and somewhat tremulous voice. "Is there any way of getting back again?"

Maurice Dene turned and looked at him compassionately. "I fear," he said, "that there is none."

"But I must try!" Frank cried out vehemently. "I must try, even if I perish in the attempt."

"My poor boy," said the King of Bezer, very gently, "there is no chance of your ever reaching the continent of Europe or Asia alive. I have no way of fitting you out for such an undertaking. On both sides of the mountains that surround this sheltered valley, at which geographers have guessed in vain, there lie trackless deserts of ice and snow, or waters more dangerous still. It is by a most marvellous Providence that you and I have arrived here alive, and it would be a hopeless task to try to get away again."

Frank started up, his eyes wild, his face livid with agony. "Why was I kept alive

then?" he said. "It would have been better for me to die on the ice than linger out my years in this desolate place! And Nelly—my Nelly—have I come through all these dangers only to think that I shall never see her again on earth?"

He hid his face in his hands and sobbed aloud.

"Take comfort," said Maurice Dene, coldly but kindly. "In the course of months and years your grief will wear itself out, as mine has done. I came here not much older than you, worn with wanderings and with remorse for the blood that I had innocently shed. Here I made myself a City of Refuge. Bezer, which is in the wilderness, is the place of my abode; and in time I found the peace which I had lost. You shall stay here with me, my son, and the wounds of your heart will heal as those in your wife's heart will heal also; and in time you will find yourself satisfied and at peace."

"Never! Never!" cried Frank. "I shall never forget—never be at peace until I have made my way back to *her*."

Maurice Dene did not contradict him, but

he looked thoughtful, and sat for some time in silence, while Frank still brooded over his troubles with his head buried between his hands.

"Sleep!" said the elder man at last, rising from his chair. "Sleep and dream, boy, of the past, which can never come to us again. We will talk of this matter another time. But you are safer in this hidden valley of mine than in the great world outside."

The conversation, then brought to a close, was renewed on another day. Maurice Dene seemed to be profoundly convinced of the impossibility of any man's passing the barrier of frozen mountains to the outer world; but Frank doubted whether long residence in the valley, and the inertness of approaching age, did not cause him to represent the dangers as greater than they were. Of these, however, it is possible that Maurice Dene had a clearer view than had he.

"But, at any rate," the old man said at length, "you cannot go now, for our short gleam of summer is already at an end. You must stay with me until spring, boy,

and then we will talk of these things again."

And for some time he steadily discountenanced any conversation on the subject, for he saw that it was useless, and that it stirred up Frank's emotions of love and sorrow much too violently for his welfare.

He encouraged Frank, however, to talk to him about his adventures and experiences on the voyage—perhaps by way of reminding him of the difficulties of the Polar regions; and it was during the relation of these matters that Frank told him the whole story of Oliver Dyson, and of his extraordinary passion for Nelly.

It was plain that Maurice Dene was much struck by this narration.


"Ah!" he said, with something like a gasp. "The Avenger of Blood! And he was on my track! He was so near! Strange indeed would it have been if it had been he who had found his way to me; he and I, deadly foes, as of necessity we must be, meeting at the Northern Pole! Even my City of Re-

fuge would not have availed me anything then."

He paused, and meditated for a time, then laid his hand, with unusual tenderness of manner, upon Frank's shoulder. "To you, as to myself, I would say the same thing," he said slowly. "Never go back to the friends who now think you are dead."

Frank lifted a rather haggard face. "You do them wrong, as you seem always to have done, sir," he said, with rather a bitter intonation. "You would scarcely believe at first that my father or your own daughter believed in your innocence. Your place is still open in their hearts—as mine will also be."

"In your father's heart, I have no doubt," said the elder man implacably. "But your wife, Frank—my daughter—is a woman, a young woman, and a very beautiful one, if she is like her mother. It is not probable that she will wait for you for ever. You need not look at me with that angry and horrified expression. I speak of my daughter only as I should speak of any other young



woman—as indeed I should speak of my wife if she were still alive.”

“What do you imply?” said Frank, breathlessly.

“I am sorry to pain you,” was the quiet reply. “I mean only that your wife will conclude you to be dead, and will marry again. Make up your mind to it, and be thankful that she is happy.”

Frank groaned. “That is impossible,” he said at first. Then, after a little pause: “I suppose she will think I am dead. If Dyson gets back he will tell her so.”

“And make love to her himself,” said Maurice Dene.

He had no wish to be cruel, but he thought that it was doing Frank a service to dispel any illusion that he might cherish as to the future. In his opinion, it was quite impossible for him to leave the City of Bezer, as he called the place; and it was as well for him to get used to the idea. But he was sorry for the young man when he saw how keenly he felt the suggestion that had been made.

“My dear boy,” he said, gently, “I do not



want to grieve you. But I do want you to face the truth. You are dead—dead to the world—dead to your wife. You will meet her in heaven—not before.”

“If I do not,” said Frank, almost fiercely, “it will not be for want of trying. Do you think I shall be content to sit down quietly here without fighting for myself? I would sooner die miserably in the ice than stay here in peace and comfort for twenty years! If your wife had been alive, would you have settled down so quietly?”

Maurice Dene drew his breath sharply.

“Perhaps not,” he said. “Perhaps not.” And he made no further suggestion as to the way in which Nelly might possibly be consoling herself in England at that moment. But it was some time before Frank got over the feeling of resentment which his father-in-law’s words had caused.

Before the summer had waned he had made a complete tour of the plain on which he lived, and had particularly examined the outlets which the river made for itself. The spot at which it entered the valley was certainly impassable. It seemed to pass

underground for some distance, and to rise to the surface only when the valley was reached. At the other side he thought that exit was more possible. Here the river passed under a kind of archway formed by overhanging crags ; but the outlet was large, and the stream seemed to be tolerably free from ice.

Frank had already found that its waters were a good deal warmer than the air, as though they were heated from subterranean sources ; and he had discovered some little fountains in the rocks which were almost boiling, like the famous springs in Iceland. This fact gave him hope, for it seemed to him possible that the warmer current of the stream might bear him safely out into the open sea, and that he might then manage to navigate his course to land. It would be a rash project—rash almost to madness ; but he was resolved to attempt it when next spring came.


For the long and dreary winter months, however, when not a gleam of natural light was to be obtained, save such as came from spectral visions of an Aurora Borealis, or

the strange splendour of the stars, he devoted himself to the occupations which Maurice Dene indicated to him. He learned how to weave cloth, to make nets, to fashion sledges and other useful articles; to do an infinity of things which he had never had occasion to do before. He also learned the language of the natives, which resembled old Norse more than any other. Maurice Dene had begun to make a grammar and dictionary of the language, but, as he acknowledged, without hope of benefiting anybody by his work.

"When you get back to England," he said one day to Frank with a half-humorous smile, "you can tell them about this language and this country."

"When I get back," said Frank, boldly, "I shall organize an expedition to this place, and take you home in triumph."

Maurice Dene shook his head. "Do you think I should be drawn so readily from my City of Refuge? No; leave us in peace; even if such an expedition became possible, Frank, leave us in peace. The race is dying out; soon there will be none of



these people left, and I desire nothing better than to leave my bones amongst them. Leave us in peace."

Frank urged upon him the increase of human knowledge which would accrue from a successful expedition of the kind; but the old man shook his head. "Too many lives have been sacrificed already," he said, "in vain attempts to explore these regions. It is useless."

"Why should it be useless? You and I have arrived here. Why should not other men?"

"Because, for one thing," said Maurice Dene, calmly, "I believe that the access to this valley will soon be closed for ever."

"What do you mean?"

"I have been here now for upwards of fifteen years. You see yonder great archway under which the river glides? I have noticed a great change during the last ten years in its conformation. In my opinion the rocks are becoming loosened, and one day the whole archway will fall in, and will very probably block up the bed of the river altogether."

“And then?”

“Then there will be a great flood in the valley. Our little huts will all be washed away, and we shall be drowned before we have time to look around us. That is the catastrophe that I fully expect to happen; and when the little City of Refuge is swept away there will be nothing of this valley but a lake of smooth water, which will speedily freeze over, and become a sheet of polished ice, beneath which the people of the place, and the Englishman who has been their leader, will lie side by side, forgotten for evermore.”

Frank was considerably impressed by the gravity with which the elder man spoke. “I hope you may be mistaken, sir,” he said, after a little pause.

“I shall not be mistaken ultimately,” said Maurice Dene, with a smile, “whether I am here to see the end or not.”

This conversation made Frank thoughtful. His own observations confirmed the truth of Maurice Dene’s remark. The cliffs would one day fall—so much was absolutely certain. Exit from the valley would then become

impossible. The great thing would be to leave it before that catastrophe occurred. If not, instant death, or a life-long incarceration in that remote corner of the world was inevitable.

This possible catastrophe began to weigh upon Frank's mind. He could not get it out of his head. His anxiety concerning ways and means of getting away from the regions of snow and ice, when once away from that depression in the earth's surface which held the collection of huts called by Maurice Dene the City of Bezer, gave way to a continual nervous fear lest the fall of those cliffs should take place.

Probably the privations and sickness which he had endured were now telling upon his nerves. At night he often woke with a start, and the echo of some imagined crash in his ears, as if the rocks had fallen and the dammed-up waters were already spreading themselves across the valley. He would get up and go out sometimes on purpose to see whether the crags were still in their accustomed places. The notion preyed upon him, and the desire to be gone from this

silent valley was like a consuming fever in his blood.

Maurice Dene watched him kindly and carefully, but did not speak further on the subject. Frank was almost too much absorbed in his own thoughts to bestow much attention on the doings of the elder man ; and he did not—for some time, at least—observe how sadly and tenderly his father-in-law looked at him, nor how thoughtful were his provisions and precautions for the young man's welfare. This absorption of Frank's by no means prevented him from performing the usual actions of courtesy and kindness which were natural to him when in company with an older man ; but they prevented him from being a cheerful and enlivening companion.

The two often sat together in absolute silence, Frank carving wood with a pocket-knife—one of his favourite occupations ; Maurice Dene generally reading to himself in his Bible—the only book in the place. He was evidently a devoutly religious man, with perhaps a streak of mania showing itself in his beliefs, for he was strongly impressed

with the idea that he had been called by a Divine Providence into these Arctic wilds as a punishment for his involuntary sin in taking a fellow-creature's life, and that he must live as an ascetic, almost as an anchorite, in expiation of this sin. To these views he did not give expression in words, but Frank felt their influence ; and although he was deeply sorry for the man, he felt that they made a barrier between them. For what sin had he committed that he should be banished to this solitary spot, more remote than any desert island, more inaccessible than any mountain peak ?

So passed the weary months of the long winter, and every month saw Frank more downcast, more hopeless, more afraid. At last he scarcely cared to move out of the house, scarcely raised his head to speak, and could hardly bring himself to eat. Maurice Dene, observing him still closely, thought that the time had come when he should be roused.

"Son Frank," he said one day—for it



was one of his peculiarities to adopt an old-world kind of speech, which came, perhaps, partly from his long-continued study of the Bible—"Son Frank, let me speak with you."

He put his hand on the young man's arm as he spoke, and Frank looked up—listlessly enough. "What is it, father?" he said.

"My son, do you know what month it is?"

"I do not know. Surely it matters very little," said Frank, wearily.

"It matters much—for you. It is the month of May, and warmer days will soon be here. If you really wish to leave me, Frank, the time is almost come. Rouse yourself, for you will need all your strength. In a month's time you must be gone."

The young man had started to his feet, and stood looking into Maurice Dene's deep-lined face, as if he could not believe his ears. Then—blame him who will for weak-

ness!—he threw his arms round the grey-beard's neck, and fell sobbing upon his shoulder.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### WHAT DYSON DID WITH FRANK LOVELL'S RING.

THE little village of Combe lay bright and fresh beneath the beams of the summer sun. There was little change in its appearance since the day when Frank Lovell made Eleanor Dene his wife four years ago. Some of the trees had no doubt grown taller, and the creeper had encroached upon the cottage walls, and there were a few more grass-covered mounds in the green churchyard ; but these changes did not count for much, and the little red houses, with their background of cliff and firs, the brown sands where the fishers spread their nets and the boats were beached at eventide, looked so absolutely the same that a sensation of wonder crept into the heart of a man who

had not trodden those narrow village streets for four long, weary, desolate years.

But he knew the world too well to suppose that there were no other changes in the place than appeared upon its surface. And it was with a view of informing himself about the inhabitants of the village that he stepped aside to speak to an old fisherman who was standing, with hands in his trousers' pockets, gazing out to the blue horizon line of the ever restless sea.

"Who lives in yonder little cottage with the roses growing so thickly over the porch?" he said, lifting his stick and pointing in the direction of a pretty little building about half-way up the cliff.

"Nobody don't live there now," said Thomas Tewson, laconically.

"Ah! a Miss Dene lived there formerly, did she not? Where is she now?"

"That's more nor you nor I can tell, measter. Singing with the saints above, as the hymn says, I do hope and trust."

The stranger fell back a step or two. His face turned ghastly white, and his hands began to tremble.

"Good God!" he said. "She cannot have succumbed so soon—so young—so beautiful—"

He spoke without knowing what he said, but the fisherman's keen brown eyes took note of his appearance, and his quick ears caught the sense of the words.

"Noan so young, nayther," he said, with humour. "Saxty-fower, if a day, as the record on the tombstone saith. 'Rachael Dene, saxty-fower,' I tell 'ee. Do 'ee call that young now?"

The visitor recovered himself, after a gasp or two.

"I was thinking of young Miss Dene," he said, "Miss Nelly Dene. I had forgotten her aunt."

"Why theer now, but you'm still all abroad-like," said the fisherman, pityingly. "Doan't 'ee know that there's no Miss Nelly Dene any longer, nor hasn't been, this fower year? She's married to young Mr. Lovell, him as went to the North Seas, and has never been heard of since."

"Yes, yes, I remember," said the stranger, hurriedly. "Mrs. Lovell, I meant. Where is she now? In Combe?"

"She be at the Vicarage, for sure. Where else should she be? She be like a darter to the Vicar, for all he've darters of his own; but there be no wonder. Mrs. Frank, she be that sweet an' winsome, she bringeth sunshine with her wherever she may go, i' spite of her own trouble."

"Does she—does she—think that her husband is still alive?"

The fisherman shook his head, and drew in his lips.

"That I can't be so bould as to tell 'ee, sir. She speaks confident-like; but she be sadly fallen away; and she comes and sits on the rocks here and gazes out to sea, so that it maketh the heart sad to see. But I doubt she'll never set eyes on her Frank again; and maybe she knows it, though she does not choose to say."

A sound almost like a groan broke from the strange man's lips. Tewson turned and looked at him steadily. Then he said slowly—

"You be a stranger yourself, sir. Do 'ee bring us news of Mr. Frank?"

"I bring news, certainly, but I must tell my news to Mr. Lovell and his family first of

all. Good-day, my man. You will soon hear all that I have to tell." And the stranger moved away, taking the road that led to the Vicarage.

"Eh, dear; and it 'll be bad news that he brings," said Thomas Tewson, as he watched the receding figure until it was out of sight. "for no man ever brought good news with a face like that."

The criticism was shrewd and not incorrect. The visitor's face was pale and expressive of an intense melancholy. His dark eyes, wild, restless, and rather sinister, had a curiously fearful and furtive look; now and then their owner glanced over his shoulder in an odd manner, as if he thought that someone was following him. The lower part of his face was covered with a black beard, and he walked languidly, as if he had but lately come out of some sickness and was still weak.

He walked up to the Vicarage door and rang the bell.

"Is Mr. Lovell at home?"

"Yes, sir. What name, sir, please?"

"Tell him that someone wishes to speak to him on business. Never mind my name.

And I should be glad if I could see Mr. Lovell alone."

The servant gave him a scrutinising glance, and seemed about to speak, then thought better of it, and showed him, after a moment's hesitation, straight to Mr. Lovell's study. The Vicar was there, and looked up quickly as the visitor was announced; but the announcement did not seem to cause him any surprise; he was accustomed to visitors who wanted to speak to him alone.

Only—the study had a window which opened like a door to the ground, and at this glass door a graceful girl was standing with a basket full of roses. She had been conversing with the Vicar, and, as she moved away, Mr. Lovell said, very kindly :

"You can take the roses without me, Nelly, my dear."

The stranger's dark eyes fixed themselves on the girl's retreating form, and the Vicar noticed that he seemed to start.

"It was my daughter-in-law," he said, in a reassuring tone. "She is going to take some flowers to a poor sick girl in the village; she likes to go about amongst the sick and



suffering," he added, with a slight involuntary sigh.

Nelly, the mirthful, the bright-eyed, full of joyousness and hope—had *she* learnt to minister to the poor and needy? She must have changed indeed. And yet she did not look changed, the stranger thought, after his parting glimpse of her; she wore a pink frock, and a straw hat trimmed with wild roses, and a flower at her neck. But he had not seen her face; and it was in her face that Nelly wore her signs of mourning; for she steadfastly refused to show them in her attire.

"You wished to speak to me, I think, sir?" said the Vicar at last, puzzled by the silence and immobility of his visitor, who would neither sit nor speak.

"Mr. Lovell," said the stranger, in a low agitated voice, "I dare not tell you my name, but surely you remember me?"

The Vicar started and peered into his face. Then a great shock seemed to run through his whole frame, and he fell back aghast.

"Dr. Dyson!" he exclaimed. "Can this be you?"

"It is I—Oliver Dyson," was the almost inaudible answer.

The man had a guilty look. He might have been going to confess a murder or tell a treacherous lie.

"Then—my boy! my Frank! Is he here too? You come with news of him? Tell me—tell me—my boy?"

"Sir," said Dyson, with obvious difficulty, "I am the unfortunate bearer of evil tidings. I am the only survivor of the *Triton* crew. I was saved, as it were, by a miracle, and have just arrived in England. I came here first of all, lest by to-morrow morning the news of my arrival should be trumpeted far and wide by the newspapers. I thought I might save you from seeing it first in the *Times*."

"You mean, sir," said Mr. Lovell, very quietly, "that my boy is dead?"


Oliver Dyson bowed his head.

The Vicar stood silent for one moment, then clasped his hands and repeated in a low tone the well-known yet never hackneyed words of the man of Uz: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be

the name of the Lord." For a moment he pressed his hands to his face, and seemed to pray silently ; then, dashing some natural moisture from his eyes, he looked up, and in a grave but perfectly steady voice addressed a remark to his visitor. "I am quite sure," he said, "that my dear boy died in the performance of his duty. It is a great thing to be able to say that. But—there are his mother and his wife to be thought of. Will you be so good, Dr. Dyson, as to give me any details that you can respecting the last hours of my son?"

He was a grand old man, grander in that moment of affliction, Dyson thought, than he had ever been in his days of ease and prosperity. He made his visitor sit down, himself sitting opposite to him, and listening, with bowed head and pallid features, to the story that the doctor had to tell.

He had not much to say. He was extremely agitated, and the Vicar liked him the better—when he had time to think of it—for that agitation. With eyes cast down, and a voice that trembled with emotion, he told something of the story of that terrible voyage ;



and how one after another his comrades had died, Frank Lovell and the captain last of all. Then came the rescue-party which had been sent from England on their track, and which, like the captain's party, had reached the furthest point ever attained in Arctic exploration ; and Dyson said how the men had found him alone in his hut, and how he had given into their hands the log-book and other memorials of his dead comrade, and even taken them to see the spot where Captain Peters lay in his grave of snow and ice ; and how they had then abandoned the little hut and gone back in their sledges to the camp, whence they had made the best of their way to the ship, that had anchored in the sound at some little distance.

"And did you bring away anything belonging to my dear boy?" the Vicar asked, after a silence.

"Yes," Dyson said, hanging his head ; he had brought a ring, and one or two other little things—if he might give them to Mrs. Lovell himself—he thought they were meant for her.

The Vicar hesitated. "Well," he said at

length, "if she can see you, it will perhaps be best. But I cannot tell—I do not know how that may be. You are staying the night at Combe?"

"Yes, I am going to the inn."

"Let me send for your baggage," said the gentle old man, "and make your home with us while you stay. You have been kind in bringing us the sad news, instead of letting us learn it in a more trying way. We shall not be very cheerful hosts, I fear, but we shall be honoured if you will be our guest."

Mr. Lovell had quite forgotten that he had been extremely indignant with Oliver Dyson on the occasion of that gentleman's last visit to the Vicarage. But Oliver had not forgotten it—for he had gathered the fact from Frank—and he therefore thought it wiser to take up his abode at the inn.

The Vicar made a faint but polite objection; and Dyson then went on his way, with the understanding that he was to be summoned next morning if Mrs. Frank Lovell could see him. Why he wanted to see her and to give her the last memorials of her

husband he could hardly tell. It was agony to himself; and, as he reflected, she would probably associate him ever afterwards with the painful associations of that day. And yet he could not help it; he felt that he would go through any pain to see her and speak to her again.

He did not sleep that night. Indeed, he was not much in the habit of sleeping at present. Unless he took opiates he generally slept for a few minutes only at a time; for as soon as slumber overtook him he was pursued by frightful visions of the dying and the dead. So far, however, he was not particularly alarmed by this. He knew that his nerves had been frightfully overstrained, and even the quiet of the voyage home had not served to restore them. He needed the balm that time and forgetfulness would bring, he thought, before he could be himself again. There was only one symptom that puzzled him a little from time to time. Wherever he went, he was apt to feel as if somebody was following him—looking over his shoulder—standing close behind. Yet when he

turned, he could see nothing. It was a nervous fancy ; it was sure to disappear when he was stronger, he told himself, and he tried to abstract his mind and forget it in the contemplation of other things.


Next morning, the Vicar himself called on him. That one night had already done a sad work. Dyson thought him looking ten years older, and noted that his hands trembled sadly when he sat down.

"My poor daughter, Dr. Dyson," he said, "would like to see you."

"I am at her service, sir."

"Will you come to her at once, then ? Poor child ! Poor child ! She has borne up wonderfully through these four years that have gone. Even when we gave up hope, she never ceased hoping. You will be gentle with her, I am sure. If there is anything too painful or horrible in the story of his death—you will spare her."

"I will pain her as little as possible," said Dyson, turning slightly away. Then, after a moment's pause, "She is young, and strong ; she will be comforted, perhaps—in time."



"God grant it!" said the Vicar, earnestly. "But her whole heart was given to Frank; and now that she has lost hope of his return, I dread to think of what may happen."

"Let me send the ring and the papers by you," said Dyson, hurriedly. "I have little to tell—I would far rather be excused."

"Oh no, no; she will not be satisfied until she has seen you. Shall we go now? She is waiting for us, poor girl."

Dyson wished himself miles away. Somehow he had not realised that these interviews were likely to be so painful. At the same time, he had a keen hunger for the sight of Nelly—for the sound of Nelly's voice; he had not forgotten her in the least, and the madness of love which had come upon him, and of which he had scarcely been conscious until he had left Combe, was gathering strength with every hour. Yes, whatever it cost him, he must see Nelly once again.

All the blinds were drawn at the Vicarage windows; the house was very




still. With a whispered word and silent footstep, Mr. Lovell led the visitor to the door of a little sitting-room, which Dyson remembered of old as Mrs. Lovell's especial sanctum. The Vicar opened the door, and spoke quietly.

"Nelly, my darling, I have brought Dr. Dyson!"

"Come in, please, father," said old Mrs. Lovell's gentle voice. She was sitting on a sofa beside Nelly, who was holding the elder woman by the hand. The Vicar entered, and signed to Dr. Dyson to follow him. They advanced to the sofa, and Mrs. Lovell held out her hand silently to the stranger. But Nelly did not look up.

"Nelly, my dear!"

She started at the sound of her mother-in-law's voice, lifted her eyes for a moment, and bowed mechanically. As Dyson's eyes became accustomed to the dim light, he saw that she was all in black, and that her face was very pale. The colour and brightness seemed to have vanished entirely from her appearance. She was like a marble statue—as silent and as cold.



"Dr. Dyson, dear Nelly, has brought you something of Frank's. He wants to tell you—"

Then she looked up. "Yes; tell me," she said. But her voice was tuneless and cold.

"I have brought you, Mrs. Lovell, your husband's ring," said Dyson in his gentlest voice. He could not make his words anything but brusque, even though his tones were gentle. "He took it from his finger—and bade me bring it to you—if ever I got home safe. . . . And two or three papers, found in his book; I brought them, not knowing what they were—a few notes only, I fear. I could not bring many things away with me. . . . He sent you the ring, as he was dying—with—with his dear love."

"His dear love," the girl repeated. There was a catch in her breath, and she spoke in a hoarse voice, unlike her own. "How did he die? Tell me. From hunger—or cold—or what?"


"From fever, brought on by over-exertion and privation," said Dyson, as if reluc-

tantly. "He always did as much as he could—too much—for everyone. He was very cheerful—the life of the ship—till he was taken ill. Then—then—he sent you his love—and you were not to grieve for him. That is all, Mrs. Lovell; I wish it were more."

"Not to grieve for him?" repeated the girl, with a great passionate sob. "Oh, the brave, gentle, noble heart! As if I should not grieve for him all my life! Oh, Frank! My darling! my darling!! What shall I do without the hope of seeing you again?"

She sank on her mother-in-law's shoulder, in a flood of tears, and Mr. Lovell signed to Dyson to follow him out of the room, explaining, as he stood outside, that he was much relieved at seeing Nelly weep, for the state of stony silence in which she had remained ever since she heard that Frank was lost, had excited their gravest alarm.

"Her brain is safe now, at any rate, I think," said the Vicar, with a sigh. "I thank you very heartily, Dr. Dyson, for your kindness and delicacy in this matter.



I hope we may see more of you. We shall always welcome any friend of our poor boy's. I hope you will come again."

Dyson thanked him, and went back to his lodgings at the inn.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A KING'S RANSOM.

FRANK'S gratitude to Maurice Dene was not unmixed with remorse. At first, indeed, he was so much horrified at the idea of leaving Bezer without him that he made a most indignant protest.

"What!" he said. "Go home without you! Leave Nelly's father to die in this miserable hole! I could never look her in the face again!"

"Am I not to be a free agent, man?" said his father-in-law, his long grey beard moving a little as he smiled one of his rare, strange smiles.

"But you cannot mean it!" cried Frank, aghast. "You surely do not mean me to go alone?"

"I should only hamper your movements," said Maurice Dene, gently. "I am growing an old man; you would do better without me."

"Indeed, with your experience of this country, I should do much better with you."

"Then I fear I must deprive you of that benefit," was the answer, still smilingly spoken, "for here, where you found me, I mean to stay. Here in my City of Refuge I will live and die."


For the moment Frank could say no more; but for some time he took but a half-hearted interest in the preparations which Maurice Dene himself was making for the departure. There was a light boat, snow-shoes, almost as useful as a sledge; there were provisions, and there was special clothing, light but warm, such as the natives wore. And when these were all completed, Maurice Dene gave instructions which were based upon theories of his own and could be tested only by experience.

He believed that the river which passed

through the valley never entirely froze, and that its warmer current ran far out into the sea, forming an open channel for a great number of miles. If Frank could keep to this open channel, he might manage to reach the open sea, and there, if the drifting ice could be steered through, it was possible that he might reach land before the harbours were locked with ice. "Possible; not likely." It was all that Maurice Dene could say.

However, he tried to be as encouraging as he could. He impressed upon Frank that he must keep some record of the spots through which he travelled, and be prepared to maintain his claim of being the first Englishman who had reached the North Pole, and discovered the tract of country which lay there. "For I am dead, you know," he said, with a weird smile, "and you are the only Englishman who has come back to tell your tale—if ever you do tell it. It strikes me that other Europeans, if not Englishmen, have found their way here before."

"What makes you think so?"



"There are traditions among the people about strangers who found their way here in days gone by. They still show the grave of one of them — or, rather, a cairn of stones erected above the grave. He lived among them a long time, they say. But he never attempted to go home again."

His voice sank into sadness, which made Frank say hesitatingly :

"Is it of no use to persuade you further? Will you not come home with me after all? for I feel convinced that I *shall* reach home at last."

"Come home and stand my trial for murder?" said the elder man, with a mocking gleam in his dark eyes. "That is the fate that would await me, my dear boy, if I returned to England. You have forgotten that fact."

Yes, Frank had forgotten, and he held his peace.

"To say nothing," continued Maurice Dene in a lower voice, "of the Avenger of Blood who lies in wait for me. *He* is alive, you may be sure of that; an



avenger does not die. He will not die, you will see, until after I am dead."

"How shall I see it?"

"My dear boy, I do not know. I spoke without thinking. Let me put it differently. When the man that you call Oliver Dyson dies, you may know that I, too, am dead. God would not let him die before me."

Frank was silent, for he perceived that his friend had got upon the topic which always excited him more than any other; and he was sorry, as he had a very uncomfortable feeling that Maurice Dene's excitement was due to a form of mania rather than to any other cause. But he listened respectfully, while the other spoke.

"You have asked me more than once," said Dene, "to quit this place, and I have refused. When you reach your home, if ever you do, my daughter will ask you why I did not come with you. Your father will ask you the same question. Are you provided with an answer?"

"Only what you have said to me, sir;

that you do not choose to come. And there is the prospect of risk, of course."

"Frank Lovell," said the elder man seriously, "if I deserved the punishment of hanging—if I had killed the man Travis of set purpose and with intent—I take my oath to you before God that I would have gone back to England long ago, and given myself up to justice. But I was innocent of evil—or, at least, of murderous intent—and yet I have no means of proving my innocence. Why, then, should I allow my daughter to bear the indignity of knowing that her father is hanged for murder?"

"No, no; I understand you, sir."


"Further than that, I am no murderer by the Mosaic law—a life for a life would then be just and right. So I have escaped, even as a man who had killed his neighbour by accident in Jewish days might escape, to this little City of Refuge of mine which I have called Bezer—Bezer in the wilderness. I need not have done that. I was safe enough from the Avenger of Blood; I might have wandered to and fro, round about the earth, and amassed riches, and taken to my-

self another wife. What withheld me from this, do you think?"

"I cannot tell, sir," said Frank, somewhat amazed at the swiftness of the question.

"Conscience, lad, conscience. I was innocent—and yet I was guilty of blood. I had hated the man in my heart; and the later lawgiver said that a man who hates another is a murderer. And yet, if I had borne the public punishment for murder, I should have deceived the world. What was there for me, then, but to seek out some place of seclusion where in silence and prayer I could repent me of my sin? For repentance is not learned in a day, let me tell you. It requires years of striving and self-discipline, and denial, before a man can truly say that he repents. Even now—after the years of toil and suffering that I have known—I hardly know—God grant that I may some day know—whether I repent or not."

He sank into sombre silence, and hung his head upon his breast until little could be seen of his face but the grey beard and the



bent brows beneath which his eyes flamed like coals of fire.

"Surely, sir," said Frank, trying out of his own simple but honest faith to re-assure him, "we know well enough when we are sorry for what we have done amiss, and trust our Maker to accept the imperfect repentance."

Maurice Dene lifted his head, and smiled at him. There was tenderness in the smile, although a heavy cloud still sat upon his brow.

"For yourself, and those like to you, you speak well," he answered. "But such words of faith do not apply to men like me. I had a wild and tempestuous youth. I have never ceased to mourn for the evil of those early days. I sought far and wide, Frank Lovell, for a place in which to hide myself; in which to weep and pray. But in every place the world stepped in and jarred my thoughts. If I had been a Romanist, I would have joined the Trappist monks, dug my own grave, and never opened my lips until I lay down in it to die. But that not being possible, I wandered over the

world, until Fate drove me here. Fate, do I say? It was the Hand of God."

There was a pause for a few minutes, the old man breathing loud and fast, the young man holding himself silent and motionless.

"When I first arrived I raged, and reviled my fate. Then, little by little, the reason why I had been led here came to me. I saw that it was in order that I might learn to repent—learn to know God. Here, then, I will remain until I have learned my lesson; and when it is learned, Frank Lovell, I have faith that God will take me home. Tell this to my daughter; tell it to my old friend Lovell; they will judge me aright."

"I also will judge you rightly, sir, and I honour your motives," said Frank.

"Aye, but you do not understand them," said Maurice Dene sharply. "You are of the world, worldly, Frank Lovell, and things of another life are dim to you. But perhaps"—his voice softening—"you are to be taught by higher powers, even as I was

taught. But not in the same way, I trust—not in the same way!”

He sighed deeply, and seemed for some minutes absorbed in thought; then he came back to evident consciousness of the situation and of Frank's awkward, half-embarrassed, half-doubtful air. He smiled slightly, and said in a much gentler tone:

“My dear boy, you and I were not made in the same mould, and it is certain we cannot have the same destiny. I think it is mine to make yours a little brighter.”

There was a significance in his tone which startled Frank into attention. What did he mean by that?

Maurice Dene seemed to reflect for a moment or two, and then said in a lower voice:


“Help me to get out a box which I keep in the inner room. I have hidden it, lest these simple natives might be dazzled by the sight of what I keep there. We have no money in our city, as you are aware; a primitive form of barter is observed, and I have sought to keep them entirely ignorant of the base lustre of gold or gems,

lest seeing them they should be corrupted."

"They would not know the value of gold or gems," said Frank.

"True, but they might admire them as beautiful things in themselves. Why not? And that is the beginning of the history of avarice and greed. The savage picks up a shiny stone and gives it to the woman he loves; she in her turn gives it away, and someone murders the owner for love of her. Then the stone gets a value of its own, and is passed from hand to hand, carrying crime and treason in its wake. It is not well to put such temptation in men's way."

Frank wondered to what this was the exordium. He had followed Dene into the inner room, and was helping him to extricate a box from a hole in the wall where it had been carefully concealed and covered over with mud. When they had got it out, Maurice took it back into the outer room, glanced around to see that no one was within sight or hearing, and then opened the box.



A layer of dried moss first met the eye. This was removed, and then, to Frank's great surprise, a leathern belt was taken out. Maurice Dene unfastened various clasps and fittings, and showed his son-in-law what the belt contained.

Diamonds! Diamonds chiefly, but also rubies, and some very fine emeralds. Most of them were uncut, but they seemed to be of enormous size and of great purity. Frank was allowed to finger them, to hold them up against the light, and weigh them in the palm of his hand before he said, with a sort of gasp—

"Why, they must be worth a king's ransom!"

"I daresay," said Maurice Dene in a careless tone. "I got them in South America, partly at the mines, partly by the bequest of an acquaintance, whose life I once saved, and who rewarded me by leaving me all that he possessed. Yes, there is a fortune in that belt."

"There is indeed."

"Well, such as it is, it is Nelly's dowry. Many a time I have been tempted to



throw the belt and its contents into the river, but each time something has kept me back. It seemed to me as if I had no right to throw the thing away; it was held in trust for another. And my instinct was right. I have kept it for fifteen years, and now I give it into your hand, Frank Lovell, for my daughter."

For a moment Frank recoiled.

"I love her just as well without any dowry," he said, rather doggedly, "and although it is very kind of you, sir, yet—I know I seem ungrateful—I would a great deal rather work for her with my own hands."

"I know you would; but you must allow a father to endow his daughter as he chooses," was the dry reply; "and you must remember that you may not always be able to work for her: your travels, if ever you get to the end of them, may leave you weak and disabled. Here you will find the means of subsisting, even if you are not so energetic as you wish to be."

Frank stammered out a few words of thanks.

"You need not thank me, young man; you do not feel very grateful, I can see. Nevertheless, in after years—if you live—you may thank me for having kept my daughter's dowry intact. A king's ransom, as you say. I have no doubt a strange history attaches to many of these gems. I do not know it. I came by them honestly, and that is all that I can say."

"I am honestly obliged to you, sir, in Nelly's name," said Frank.

"Well, well. Wear the belt round your waist; next your skin. That will be safest; and it is not heavy. Go and put it on; then I shall be rid of it. It is Nelly's remember; not yours, young man."

"I shall remember," said Frank cheerfully.

He was in high spirits now: indeed, he could hardly contain himself, and had to put a check on the expression of his feeling of delight at leaving this desolate land. "City of Bezer! City of Refuge, indeed!" he said to himself. "I call it rather a City of Death—the *Città Dolente*

from which there is no escape." Then his heart smote him for ingratitude. "I ought not to think so; for, after all, I should have died without it. It was veritably to me a City of Refuge, I think. And yet—God grant that I may make my escape!"

He was busy enough for the next few days completing his preparations, and helping Maurice Dene to compile in the smallest space possible a mass of memoranda respecting the exact situation of the City of Bezer, its nearness to the North Pole, the possibility of reaching it from the Asiatic coast, and so on. It is needless to set before the reader the substance of these papers, because, as he will afterwards learn, they never reached the eyes for which they were intended. They perished, as other memorials of the City of Bezer have perished, in those frozen latitudes where the step of man is never heard.

The day came at last—the fatal day, as

Maurice Dene deemed it sadly—the day of joyful escape, as Frank called it in his heart. The young man was to embark in his frail skiff at a point as near the crags as was judged necessary. No one but Maurice saw him go; for the King of Bezer had no mind that his subjects should be seized with the spirit of adventure or curiosity, and venture forth from their sheltered valley to the bitter snows of the outer Arctic circle. Inside this strange valley, or depression of the earth, there was vegetation, life, comparative warmth. Beyond its encircling cliffs was a waste of ice, snow, and the cold that brings death in its train. Would Frank Lovell ever get through that belt of Arctic severity and win his way again to civilisation, and wealth, and ease? Maurice Dene thought not.

But, because he thought not, he was kind and even tender in his farewell to the young man. Every provision that was possible for his journey, every piece of advice that might be useful on the way, was


given to him. And then the elder man solemnly blessed him and wished him good-bye.

Even at this last moment Frank's heart was touched with tender remorse.

"Oh, come with me—come with me!" he cried. "How can I leave you in this land of darkness and loneliness? What shall I say to Nelly when I tell her that I have left you behind?"

"Tell her," said Maurice, with a smile, "that you left me safe, well, and happy, and that if I had left my City of Refuge it would have been to court my death. Take her my love and my blessing—God bless you both, my daughter and my son."

Then Frank kissed him, as he had kissed his own father when he said good-bye, and got into his little boat. As he floated down the stream he saw for a long time the strange figure of the old man with floating grey hair, and garments made of skins, standing motionless upon that



nameless river's bank. He saw him often in his dreams, but never in this life any more.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### A WIDOWED HEART.

AND again it was full summer at Combe, and the roses bloomed in the gardens, and the little waves laughed as they cast themselves up on the beach with a silver ripple like the sound of music. Round the Vicarage there was a delightful stretch of ground, sward, flower-beds, shrubberies, shaded by well-grown trees, and kept in beautiful order by the gardener and Miss Nora. Mrs. Lovell used to help, but she was now too feeble to do very much; and Mrs. Frank—well, everyone knew that since her troubles Mrs. Frank had lost interest in everything, and had seemed for a time likely to go into “a waste,” so that it was no use expecting her to

concern herself about the garden, poor thing!

But two years had passed since Dr. Dyson brought home the news of Frank Lovell's death, and although Nelly's health had for a time suffered severely, yet by and by she was able to rally, and to settle down to her quiet, unhopeful life at the Vicarage. Unhopeful at present, but not without possibilities that the shattered existence would one day unite, and new ties be created for a young creature who had scarcely known more than the name of wife.

So at least some people thought. Even the Vicar, noting her sweetness and her grace, wondered whether it would not be well for her—by and by—to go a little more into the world, and let herself be seen and known. For Eleanor Lovell was a very beautiful woman now—far more beautiful than Nelly Dene. The prettiness of Nelly Dene had been of the sparkling, dimpling order—very attractive, very charming, but not of the grander and nobler kind. Eleanor



Lovell's beauty was almost stately in its grave simplicity, in the consciousness of an ever-present sorrow that looked out at you from her clear and pensive eyes.

The widowed Mrs. Frank Lovell was very much admired. People made expeditions to Combe to see her, and traps to allure her into their drawing-rooms. These were not always very successful. She did not like being stared at, and she had no interest at all in men. "Now all men to me are but as shadows," she might have said with the woman who sang of "Douglas, tender and true."

There had been but one man in all the world for her, and he was gone. But there was scarcely a human being about her world who comprehended that. If anyone, Mrs. Lovell did. She knew what it was to love one man only, and to be faithful to him; she knew in her heart of hearts that if her husband had died, even in early youth, she would never have chosen any other man. And if Nelly were of the same mind, Mrs. Lovell would sympathise with her.

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Naturally, the Vicar did not quite understand all this ; he thought that it would be right and fitting if Nelly married again—indeed, that it might be rather a good thing, if she could make up her mind to it. For what would she do when he and his wife were gone? She had a pittance of her own ; but she would have no home to go to ; even Nora was now engaged to be married, and Grace had gone off long before ; Nelly could hardly hope to have a permanent home with her sisters or brothers-in-law, although they were very fond of her. The Vicar was quite alive to her affection for poor Frank, but he was a man, after all, as Mrs. Lovell sometimes said with a critical smile, and he did not understand women's feelings upon these subjects.

She said as much to him that summer evening, as they sat together just inside the drawing-room, with the French window partly open, enjoying the soft balmy air. Outside the window, the garden lay bathed in partial sunlight and delicate shadow ; Nora, in white dress with black ribbons, was helping the gardener to water some of the

plants. Nelly walked soberly up and down the tennis lawn, with a visitor by her side. The Vicar and his wife were looking at the visitor, and it was of him that they had been speaking when she said, with unwonted decision, that he did not understand what women felt.

Mr. Lovell looked at her in mild surprise. They differed so seldom that he was quite taken aback by her remark.

"I am sure, dear," he said, deprecatingly, after a moment's silence, "that Dr. Dyson is a very nice fellow—in his way."

"Oh, yes, dear; I have nothing to say against Dr. Dyson; only to put him in comparison with our dear boy—"

"Which is what I would never do," said the Vicar, rather warmly. "I was only looking forward to poor Nelly's future, and trying to remind myself that it would not do to be selfish on her account. She is still young, poor girl; it would be unreasonable on our part, Letty, to expect her to remember—as *we* do."

"I think I understand Nelly," said Mrs. Lovell, with mild dignity. "She was

very deeply attached to poor Frank, Edmund, and I should be very sorry to urge her into a second marriage against her will."

"Of course—of course. I should never in the least advocate any such thing. I spoke only because I fancied she had a liking for him, and, you know, Dyson spoke to me himself the other day. However, she is quite right, quite right, poor little girl; if her heart is still true to our dear boy, I should be the last person to dream of her marrying again."

And Mr. Lovell got up, put down his book, and went away.

Mrs. Lovell in her turn put down her knitting and looked thoughtful. She understood her husband, and she saw that he was in some way vexed or discomposed. She wondered what this Oliver Dyson had been saying to him. And she resolved to have a word with Oliver Dyson herself as soon as she could get the chance.

She did not like the young doctor very much, although she scarcely could tell why. He had rarely quitted Combe since

his return to England. Instead of going to his friends (if he had any), or settling in London, he had announced his intention of living at Combe. The old doctor was dead, and there was a practice to be picked up almost for the asking. He had taken the cottage, on the hill once tenanted by Miss Rachel Dene and her niece, and there he had lived ever since, doctoring the poor, and spending his evenings generally at the Vicarage. A most blameless young man. And yet Mrs. Lovell did not like him.

Was it his face? It was handsome enough. He had shaved off his thick black beard, and wore only a moustache; his face was pale, but healthier-looking than when he landed in England. The only disagreeable part of it was a habit of nervous twitching, of which he seemed quite unconscious, and a trick of glancing sideways over his shoulder, as if he thought someone were just behind him. These two points certainly made sensitive persons uncomfortable sometimes in his society. Mrs. Lovell was aware of that sensation in herself, but she

had never heard Nelly remark on it. His manners were good, on the whole, not quite those of one to the manner born, perhaps, but almost obtrusively polite and deferential. Then he was a clever man, capable of rising to distinction. As to his family, and his means, Mrs. Lovell was hardly worldly enough to have considered them. If Nelly cared for him, the two would of course marry, and some position be found for him. But the question was—did Nelly care? Mrs. Lovell did not believe she did, nor that she ever would.

She was still reflecting on these matters, when she saw that Nelly and her companion had separated. Nelly had walked across the lawn to the spot where Nora was busy, and entered into conversation with her. Her long black drapery made her look almost like some graceful nun as she stood talking to the white-robed Nora. Dr. Dyson was walking towards the house, like a man in a dream, with his head bent despondently upon his breast. He came close to the drawing-room window without

looking up, and then Mrs. Lovell said his name.

He started violently, and looked at her.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Lovell," he then said, recovering himself; "I did not notice where I was going, or that you were sitting here. A fine evening, is it not?"

"Very fine. You seemed to be deeply absorbed in your own reflections, Dr. Dyson."

The doctor glanced at her as if he did not quite know how to take this remark, and therefore kept silence for a moment.

"I have been talking to Mrs. Frank Lovell," he said at last, in an explanatory tone, and then came to a full stop.

"Yes, so I saw," Mrs. Lovell answered quietly.

"I fear you are against me also, Mrs. Lovell."

"Against you, Dr. Dyson! I scarcely understand."

"I know I am not worthy of your daughter-in-law. But she may some day be left alone in the world and be glad of a friend. Mr. Lovell has perhaps told you that I love her—that I want her to be my wife. I would make her as happy as a woman could be—I would work for her with all my might—I could be famous for her sake."

His voice broke; he turned away abruptly, and stood looking across the garden to the lawn, where Nelly, in her long black gown, stood by the flower-border with Nora Lovell.

Mrs. Lovell cleared her throat before she spoke. She felt a little sorry for Dr. Dyson; there had been genuine feeling in his voice, and he was evidently very unhappy. But the mother's heart yearned over her lost son. She could not endure that a stranger should take his place—least of all this stranger, who had been the cause of a painful revelation to Nelly in days gone by, and who had brought to her the news of her husband's death. Of course, she told herself with a sense of compunc-



tion, it was not the doctor's fault that he was associated with these scenes of distress ; but she was woman enough to feel the sight of him unpleasant to her, and she wondered very much whether Nelly did not feel with her.

"It is—for Nelly herself to decide," she said at length, trying not to speak coldly. "I shall not influence her either way. But I know that many people think it would be for her good ; and the Vicar thinks so too. Indeed, Dr. Dyson, I have no wish to be against you ; but you must remember it is not easy for a mother to forget her son."

"That depends on the mother," said Oliver Dyson, with sudden bitterness of tone ; "and"—in a lower voice—"sometimes on the son."

"Just so. And no mother ever had a better son than my dear, dear Frank. You can hardly expect me to wish him to be forgotten."

"No—no—I understand. I have a powerful rival still," said the young man gloomily—so gloomily that Mrs. Lovell raised her

eyes in surprise. But Dyson did not see her ; he was looking down, and kicking the gravel with his foot. It seemed almost as if he had forgotten Mrs. Lovell's presence, and was speaking only of himself. "He has the advantage of me still—he always had. I shall never get away from him, alive or dead."

He was shaken by a curious shiver—gave a sharp look over his shoulder—and was gone before Mrs. Lovell could ask him what he meant. The good lady was half astonished, half offended, both by his words and by his abrupt departure. She could not tell what to think of him, and resumed her knitting in manifest displeasure.

But she forgot her annoyance when Nelly came walking slowly up to the open window, with her hands full of flowers, and her long dress sweeping the grass behind her.

There were some people who said that Nelly was prettier than ever in her widow's garb ; but "pretty" was hardly the word that ought to have been applied to her.

There was something fragile about her beauty now, something especially sweet and pathetic. She was very much paler than she had been in the days of her first youth, and her eyes had shadows round them which used not to be there. Her proud head was a little bent, and her walk was less elastic than of old, but the grace, the sweetness, the beauty were all present, and as she drew near, Mrs. Lovell felt that it was no wonder if a man wanted to woo and win her, and wear her as his own.

The plain black dress, the delicate cambric collar and cuffs, the white cap with its long streamers, were all as strictly in order as any widow's dress could be ; Nelly had seemed to find a strange satisfaction in making her mourning very deep ; but the sombreness of colour and absence of ornament only seemed to throw her loveliness of face and figure into strong relief.

She stood by the open window in silence for a moment or two, then stepped over the threshold, and laid her flowers on the little table at Mrs. Lovell's side.

"Thank you, my darling. How sweet they are !"

"Very sweet," said Nelly, in rather an abstracted voice.

Then she sat down beside her mother-in-law, and looked out of the window.

Mrs. Lovell took one of the girl's hands in her own, and stroked it gently.

"Dear Nelly," she said softly.

The two women's eyes encountered for a moment, and the story was told in the glance. There was no need for words.

"Mother," said Nelly, in a troubled voice, "you know that I can never forget."

"Never, I know, my child."

"The only thing is—am I selfish to wish to keep my sorrow? It is almost like a friend to me now; I do not want to give it up. There is no joy, no pleasure in the world that could tempt me. But—dear father always tells me that peace comes with self-sacrifice; and I have never sacrificed myself."

"How would you sacrifice yourself, Nelly?"

"I might make another person happy,"

she said, restlessly. "I might put a little brightness into his life. He has had very little so far—and he loves me."

"So you would sacrifice Frank's memory in order to make Oliver Dyson a little happier?" said Mrs. Lovell, reproachfully.

"Oh, no, no, dearest mother! I would not—I could not! I should never—oh, Frank, Frank!"

And then, to Mrs. Lovell's distress, Nelly burst into one of those terrible paroxysms of weeping which had, in the early days of her widowhood, been frequent and overpowering. Of late they had occurred but seldom; and they always left her in a state of such prostration that Mrs. Lovell was infinitely grieved to think that her own words could have helped to bring on the crisis. She strove by every means in her power to make Nelly forget the tone of reproach which she had used; and in conversation with her husband she almost promised him that she would support Dr. Dyson in his suit. At any rate, she would make no active opposition to it; for if the Vicar

thought that the arrangement would conduce to Nelly's happiness, he must be right; and it was the duty of a good wife to follow her husband's leading.

Meanwhile, poor Nelly was torn in twain by a variety of emotions which she found it difficult to classify. Her passionate love for Frank was as strong as ever; her grief for him was as profound; but on the other hand, she had a great desire to be unselfish in her sorrow, and she felt that she had a tendency to sink into sheer indifference to the needs of others.

The sunshine and warmth of summer made her languid; she would have liked to sit still and think of the days that were gone; she had no inclination to give her mind to the duties of common life. For this she blamed herself severely, calling herself all sorts of hard names when she found that she had been absorbed in sad memories when she should have been visiting the poor in the village, or doing little scraps of household work; and set herself to finding out ways of mortifying

her own inclinations, and doing the tasks that she most disliked. She did not know that her languor was largely caused by physical weakness. The events of the past years, and more especially the suspense which she had endured so long, followed by a crushing blow at the end of it, had exhausted her strength more than she suspected; and although at times she looked at herself in the glass with surprise to find herself so pale, or laughed a little bitterly at the slenderness of her white fingers, she did not notice that from day to day her strength declined, and that it seemed, to every other eye, quite obvious that she was fading like a flower nipped by a cruel wind.

Like others, Oliver Dyson saw it, and he gnashed his teeth with futile rage and agony as he began to realise what this might mean for him. Had he done so much—had he thrown away his honour and his humanity only to find his reward missing at the end? He had bartered his very soul that he might have a chance of winning Nelly to be his wife; and now—

were he even successful—was she to die at the very moment of his triumph? In that case, he acknowledged to himself with a thrill of horror, hell would have begun for him indeed. For not only would he have killed Frank Lovell, but he would be the murderer of the woman that he loved.



## CHAPTER XIV.

“SWEET, LOVELY DEATH—”

AUTUMN came early that year, and with the yellowing leaves and ripened fields there came also certain signs of weakness, perhaps of disease, in the young widow's face.

These drove Oliver Dyson almost mad with anxiety and pain. The blue veins on Nelly's temples, the violet shadows beneath her sweet eyes, the hectic flush on her thin cheeks, gave him a courage born of desperation. He spoke to her of his love more strongly than he had ever spoken before. She had been very cold to him when he first mentioned it; then she had suffered him to speak without rebuke; and then—oh, furthest step of all—she had

begun to argue, to reply. From the moment that he found her capable of discussing the subject, Oliver did not despair. Nay, he drew hope even from the pain that she no longer disguised from him. The quivering lips and tear-filled eyes with which she now spoke to him of Frank seemed to him a sure sign that she would one day be comforted. It was when she was silent and cold, like some fair statue carved in stone, that he despaired.

He found her, one mild September day, sitting in the garden. The Vicar had brought out a deep, low-seated chair for her, and Mrs. Lovell had wrapped her up in a warm shawl, before they started for some church or choir festivity in a neighbouring village, taking Grace with them.

Probably Dr. Dyson knew that she would be left alone, and meant to take that opportunity of pleading his own cause.

Nelly had a book upon her lap, but she was not reading. Her large eyes, which always wore now a stricken look like that of a dumb animal wounded even unto death, were fixed upon the sapphire sea,

which could be seen between the branches of the garden trees. She always had her chair placed where she could see that sparkling expanse of foam-flecked blue.

Oliver Dyson cursed it in his heart, and thought that there was no chance of her recovery to health and gladness so long as she had the sea, with its haunting memories, for ever before her eyes.

She greeted him languidly, but with a smile, and allowed him to draw another chair to her side.

"I have had news to-day," he said; and, although his voice was quiet, there was a slight flush upon his cheek, betokening some suppressed excitement.

"Yes? I hope it was good news," said Nelly, gently.

He looked up with a flash in his dark eyes. They were seldom now disfigured by coloured glasses, as they had been when first he came to Combe, and their slumbering depths were not often stirred to passion. Rather they were eyes with a deadened look, as if turned in upon some matter of perpetual recollection; but when

now and again, they awoke, they gave wonderful meaning and fire to his beautiful haggard face.

"It is for you to make the news good or bad," he said, vehemently.

"I do not understand." Her voice was indifferent and cold.

"I will tell you what it is," he said, carefully controlling himself. "I have had an unexpected legacy from an old friend of mine; from a man who was a sort of—guardian to me when I was a boy. He is dead, and he has left me five thousand pounds. Not a great deal; but enough to make a considerable difference in my position."

"I am glad to hear of your good fortune; I congratulate you," said Nelly, in the same weary tones.

"I could do now some of the things that I have been longing to do. I could go away to the shores of the Mediterranean, to Algeria, to Egypt—to places where the sun shines and the flowers bloom; I could live there—happy and remote—"

His voice broke; his breathing came short and fast; he was evidently very profoundly moved.

"Then why not go?" said Nelly. "If you want to go so much, I should start at once, if I were you."

"Do you think I want to go for my own sake?" he asked in low, yet passionate tones. "Do you think I want to go—*alone?*"

Nelly's face crimsoned painfully, then grew extremely white. She saw now what he meant to say; she had not at first realised that he was going to force an answer from her lips once and for all.

She made a little movement as if to rise, but he laid his hand gently upon her arm, and spoke entreatingly.

"For heaven's sake don't go yet. Hear me out for once. You will *never* listen; and I must—I must have an answer now."

Nelly glanced at him and sank back in her chair without a word. She was almost frightened by what she saw in

his worn, passionate face. His lips were white, his nostrils twitched; the veins were swollen upon his forehead. Instinctively she knew that she must listen, whether she wanted to hear or not.

"Nelly, I must speak. I want to take you away—not for my own sake alone, but for yours. I want to transplant you to some warmer, sunnier place, where you can regain your strength, your bloom. Don't you *know* how ill you are looking? Don't you know that it breaks my heart to see you fading away before my eyes? I have chafed a thousand times against the fate that keeps you here, and that prevented me from asking you to come away. Now things are altered; I can save you now, darling; you must not refuse to come."

She listened to him with a strange, dilated eye, and a curious smile upon her lips. Possibly he did not know how much he had revealed to her. She had not previously thought of the issues of life and death.

"Do you think me so very ill?" she

asked, at length, in a voice from which the indifference had flown.

"Not so ill but that you could easily recover in the South. What I dread for you is the winter in England."

"You think that if I spent the winter in England I might die?"

Dyson sighed and moved restlessly in his chair.

"No, no; I do not say so. But you might be ill—you might—you know yourself how weak you are—weaker than you like to let us think. You would be happy to lie still and rest—never to have to tire yourself or be fretted by little household cares—"

"Those are not what I mind," said Nelly, with new intensity. "But now I see what you think. You think I shall die if I stay in England; then—all the more—let me stay. Don't you think it would be the greatest joy in the world to me if I knew that I were going to Frank so soon? I have not dared to pray for death; but if I am to die, I shall be glad—glad! Don't scheme to keep me alive;

let me die quietly and go to my husband—it is all I want."

She shed a few tears as she concluded ; and Dyson, keenly wounded and dismayed, sprang to his feet and walked to and fro for a little while, without venturing to address her.

It was she who at last called him back to her, with a wan smile.

"Forgive me, Dr. Dyson," she said ; " I am afraid I have taken your communication very badly. But I was surprised for the moment—and the prospect of going away—of dying, I mean—seemed too much for me. It seemed too good to be true."

Oliver Dyson groaned aloud with uncomprehending agony. He almost thought that Nelly must be mad. But she went on serenely.

"I do not wish to be selfish. Perhaps it is not right to long for death as I sometimes do. Tell me exactly what you think of my chances—in England or abroad."

"I have not examined you professionally," he said. "I am only thinking of your



appearance—your evident want of strength, and so on. But I am convinced that I am right. A winter in the South would do you an immense amount of good. Let me take you, and I promise you—you will soon be well.”

“Shall I?” said Nelly, musingly. “But then—that prospect is not so attractive to me as you think it ought to be.”

Dyson caught at one of her words. “You are always thinking of what you *ought* to do,” he said. “You are a saint—an angel—very different from me. I have no right to remind you of what you ought to do. But some people would say you *ought* to take advantage of means to make you well—”

“Yes, I am afraid they would,” said Nelly with a sigh.

“Besides,” Dyson continued in a choked voice, “*he* himself—bade you be happy—before he died—”

There was a silence. Nelly put her hand up to her face, and Oliver Dyson saw how it trembled. He turned aside,

and bit his lip hard. He knew that he had tried to reinforce his cause by a cowardly lie, and he felt that he was vile. But he had gone too far to draw back ; and he was resolved at all hazards to succeed.

"You are right to remind me of that," faltered Nelly at last. "Yes—he died—doing his duty ; and I must do mine—for life, not death. But oh, I did hope to die ! If I get better now, I may live for twenty—thirty—perhaps forty years longer, may I not ?"

"For more, I trust," replied Dr. Dyson hoarsely.

"Oh, no ; I hope not. And now—now—"

"Now—if you will but realise it—now is your opportunity of making a man happy and blest, who never was happy and blest before. I have had the life of a dog ; and you can make it brighter by a word—a smile. Is my love nothing at all to you—my *love*, Nelly, the love of heart, and mind, and soul—that you can throw it away and bury your life in a dead

man's grave? Oh, I don't mean to speak disparagingly of your love for Frank Lovell; give him all your heart, if you will, or almost all—leave me a corner only, a thought, a single thought, and I shall be satisfied. I ask so little, Nelly, and I want to do so much; will you not take pity upon me?"

The words were stumbling and disconnected; the sense of them was sometimes lost by Nelly's listening ear; but of the genuineness of the man's feeling there could be no doubt. And Nelly pitied him, and thought of her own lost love.

"Dr. Dyson," she said at length, gently and gravely, "I know that you care for me, and I am grateful to you for your love. But you know I have none to give you in return. I loved my husband; he has taken my heart away with him. Would it in any way satisfy you if I gave you myself without giving you my love? Would it not be an endless disappointment and vexation to you?"

"It would be the greatest joy—one of the greatest—I could receive. I know you

don't love me now, but in time, Nelly, you would come to care a little for me. And whether you did or not, you would be giving me—more than I could thank you for."

And with that he bent his head—for he was again sitting at her side—so that his lips could touch her hand, which was lying on her knee.

Nelly's face did not flush, her eyes did not brighten, but neither did she draw the hand away. She looked at him thoughtfully, with a certain pity and compunction in her heart.

"Mr. Lovell has been warning me against selfishness in my grief," she said simply. "He says that sorrow need not prevent me from giving joy to others. I suppose that is true. If you like—if you wish—I will marry you—but not because I love you, only because—"

She could not go on; the tears flowed down her pale cheeks, and she covered her face with her hands.

Dyson was in an ecstasy of triumph; but he did his best to keep down any too effu-

sive expression of his feelings, as he felt that they would be unacceptable to her just then. He contented himself with a few well-chosen words of gratitude and vehement promises that he would do all that she wished him to do, and devote his whole life to her service.

Then he glided onward to the subject of climate and temperature ; inquired whether there were any towns in Southern Europe that she particularly wished to see, and so on, making it quite evident that he took it for granted that their marriage would soon take place, and that they would spend the winter in the South.

Nelly bore this for a little while, and replied rather hurriedly and incoherently ; but by and by it became too much for her, and she broke forth in a tone of passionate entreaty :

"Please—*please* do not talk about it as if it were so certain—and so near!"

Dyson paused in surprise.

"But, Nelly, my own darling, you have promised me! You do not mean to break your promise ; it is a certain thing, is it not?"

"Oh, yes—yes, but not yet—I could not bear it yet," said Nelly incoherently. "You must not press me—I will keep my promise—but it seems as if I were so faithless to—to—Frank."

Oliver held his tongue, but he cursed Frank in his heart, as well as the instability of women, and the obstinacy which they sometimes displayed, two characteristics which, as he did not stop to think, rather contradicted one another.

He found, however, a strong ally in the Vicar, as soon as the news was told. Mr. and Mrs. Lovell were growing old and feeble, and they were concerned about Nelly's future; her health, too, was a subject of great anxiety with them. That she should spend the next winter abroad would, perhaps, renew her failing strength, and they agreed, though somewhat sadly, to the project of a speedy wedding. If Nelly would but consent—but that was the difficult thing.

When Mrs. Lovell spoke to her about it, she went into floods of tears, and could not be induced to fix a day. If she had met

with any support from her friends, she would many a time have boldly thrown Dr. Dyson over; but they all seemed to think that she was doing just what was right, and she was too weak and weary to fight.

It was only when October was nearly over, and a spell of cold wet weather set in, that Oliver nerved himself to the task of speaking strongly to her again concerning her health and the need that she should seek a warmer climate for the winter.

"And you cannot do that unless we are married very soon, Nelly," he said.

"Soon?" she said, with twitching lips. "How soon?"

"We ought to be away before the end of November, dearest."

She turned very pale. "Oliver," she said, "I know it is wrong; but — oh, I would so much sooner die, and keep my love for Frank unsullied to the end."

It was a hard thing for him to hear her say; but he controlled himself admirably.

"Darling," he said, "don't you know that I understand your feeling, and honour you for it? But you will not sully your love for Frank by marrying me. He wished you to be happy after he was gone. He even thought it possible—and — right — that you — would — love — again."

The words came out with some little difficulty. Accustomed as Dyson was to lying, he shrank from this one particular lie. And it certainly advanced his cause; for Nelly's face crimsoned, and her eyes flashed as she heard the statement.

"Did he say that?" she asked, as one deeply wounded. "Did he think that I should *love* again?"

"He did, indeed."

"He was mistaken in me," said Nelly bitterly. "Oh, Frank, how could you?— But I will not believe it; at least I will only believe that he wanted me to be happy. As if I could ever care for anyone as I cared for him?" And again she wept



All this was agony to Dyson. But he knew better than to show anger or impatience ; he only stood silent, with an expression of intense suffering stamped upon his pale, impassive face. Nelly looked up at last and saw it, and her heart was touched.

"Oh, how trying I must be to you!" she cried, penitently. "Indeed, I did mean to be good. I will not talk in this way any more. Oliver, I will try!"

"You will try to love me?" he said, with sudden fervour.

Her eyes fell.

"I will try at least to be a good wife to you," she said gently. "And it shall be when you please. You can choose the day, Oliver ; I will marry you any time you like."

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE TWENTIETH OF THE MONTH.

WHEN Dr. Dyson had got Nelly's consent to a speedy marriage, and had, after consultation with Mrs. Lovell, fixed the day for the 20th of November, he went back to his little cottage on the hill in a state of considerable elation.

The only thing that troubled him was the remembrance of the statement he had been "compelled" (he said to himself) to make, respecting Frank Lovell's approval of Nelly's possible marriage. Why it should have troubled him at all it would have been hard indeed to say, for he was little troubled by crimes of much greater magnitude, and was not, as a rule, disposed to regret his actions unless they had been unsuccessful; but the fact remained—he was distinctly

troubled and depressed at the thought of the lie which he had told, and very much wished that it was never "necessary" to tell lies at all.

"When I'm once married," he said moodily to himself, "I'll keep straight. I'll turn over a new leaf, by God I will. I've had enough of this worrying business. I'll forget the past, and I'll lead a different kind of life, if only for Nelly's sake. She's so good herself, she makes me want to be like her."

He concluded by a jarring kind of laugh, and sat down, as the evening was warm and dry, on a bench in the garden. The sun was setting, and the air was calm and still. He drew out his pipe and felt for a light; he might as well have a smoke out of doors before it grew dark and cold.

As he smoked, he revolved various matters in his mind. He smiled at the thought of Nelly as his wife, and began to make plans as to the places he would visit when once he and his bride had left England. The change of air and scene, the warmth

and brightness of Italy and the Riviera, would surely, he thought, bring back to Nelly the strength that she at present lacked. He knew that she had no organic disease. With a new motive for living, with "the will to live," she would get better, and be well and strong as ever. His professional knowledge told him that. And he would not listen to an inward voice which whispered that Nelly would gain no additional motive for living by her marriage with him.

No, he told himself; Nelly would soon recover, and then they would have a jovial time. For himself, he had never been so well and strong; he had got over the nervous weaknesses which had oppressed him at first after his return home; the little optical delusions, and other signs of a disordered nervous system, had completely disappeared. So much, he said, throwing back his head with a laugh, for the fancies of people who talked about remorse and a consciousness of evil-doing. Why, had he not committed one of the worst crimes in the Decalogue, and forgotten it? Did it

trouble him in the least? Did he ever think, nowadays, of Frank Lovell, left behind in the deserts of snow and ice to die!

Heavens! who was that? What was that behind him?

He sprang from his seat with a stifled cry — his head turned wildly over his left shoulder. Nobody was there. What had he seen?

In a moment or two his self-control came back to him. His eyes were still staring, his hands clutching at vacancy; but gradually his head returned to its usual position. Then he sat down again, hid his face in his hands, and sat trembling in every limb.

"What a fool!" he muttered to himself. "I thought that I saw Frank Lovell! Are my nerves going to play me tricks over again? It is to-day's excitement, I suppose."

After a little time he rose, and, with a half-scared glance round him, made his way into the house, where he procured for himself a stiff glass of brandy and

water, which he drank almost at one draught.

Then, feeling unequal to any further exertion, he pulled off his clothes, got into bed, and slept a heavy, dreamless sleep until the morning.

When he rose, he realised how completely his nerves had been upset. His hand trembled so that he could not shave; he could not eat his breakfast.

But the fancy which had disturbed him did not come again. He kept looking for it, but it was not there. So long as he remembered it, the figment of his diseased imagination did not reappear.

It was when he had regained a little confidence, and was talking to Nelly in the course of the afternoon, that he again became aware of it.

In the Vicarage drawing-room, as he sat on the sofa with Nelly's hand in his own, he became suddenly, disagreeably conscious of the sensation that someone was watching him from behind.

He turned once or twice to make sure no one was there. And when he turned

for the second time he felt sure that he was about to see Lovell's face.

This time he did not cry out nor start up from his seat. The thing had got to be faced, and, as a doctor, he was prepared to face it.

His nerves had gone wrong again. He acknowledged that it was an exceedingly difficult thing to get away from the influences of convention and tradition; and it was perfectly natural—as he had done a strikingly unconventional thing, a thing which people who held by tradition called by the ugly name of “murder”—that whenever his nerves were unstrung, some reflex of the antiquated scruples of mankind should take shape, in the outward semblance, perchance, of the man whom he had killed. (Thus he explained to himself what he seemed to see.)

The only thing to be done was to quiet and calm his nerves as much as possible, and to that end he would take bromide of potassium before he went to bed that night. The change of scene, the delight of marriage, would, no doubt, effect a perfect cure.

In the meantime, he must ignore the phantoms, and not give Nelly or anyone else any reason to suppose that he was haunted by what ignorant folk might call Frank Lovell's ghost.

It was easier said than done. In spite of himself, he started and blanched when he fancied he saw that shadowy face peeping over his shoulder; and the old trick of glancing sideways became so persistent that more than one person remarked upon it, and said that Dr. Dyson looked as if he were afraid of his own shadow.

The vision was not always to be seen. Sometimes it vanished altogether, and Oliver Dyson's brow would clear and his eyes would light up with the hope that he was delivered from the ghost of his former sin; but then, suddenly—in the midst of company, at noon-day, or alone in his little cottage at dead of night—he would feel conscious of that presence just behind him, and would shiver with the fear of meeting those unseen ghostly eyes. He had a fancy that if he met those eyes, and



saw that shadowy visitant face to face, he would go mad.

The effort to preserve himself from looking odd and nervous, his secret fear of the delusion which his own acts had forged for himself, soon told on his appearance. He could not sleep at night, and grew so haggard and so pale that the Lovells became anxious about him.

"I hope Nelly is not going to have an invalid on her hands," said Mrs. Lovell, rather fearfully, to her husband. "*That* would not do her much good."

"Oh, he'll be all right when he is married," said the Vicar. "The young man is evidently very devoted to Eleanor; he is simply eating his heart out with impatience for the marriage-day."

Nelly alone did not appear to notice Oliver's altered demeanour. She had plenty to think of without that. She had various preparations to make for her second wedding, and she did not shirk any of the duties forced on her by her position, but it was evident that she took no pleasure in them. She was silent, nervous, preoccupied.

And on the night when her wedding dress came home—a plain lavender silk, such as is supposed to be suitable for the nuptials of a widow—she burst into an agony of tears at the sight of it, and begged it to be taken away, as she should never bear to put it on, and hated her future bridegroom, Oliver Dyson, more than anything or anybody in the world.

She was humble and penitent enough when she recovered her calmness, and she begged Mrs. Lovell not to think of what she had said, and, above all, not to tell poor Oliver about it; but enough had already been imparted to Oliver to make him dismally uneasy; and when she came downstairs to see him—it was the evening before that twentieth of November which was to be their wedding-day—he met her with an ill-concealed concern and anxiety which told her only too clearly that her outbreak of sorrow and passionate regret was known to him.

She was looking extremely white and worn; her eyelids were swollen, and her lips had lost their colour; but even with

this lack of beauty, these signs of grief for another man, Oliver Dyson felt passionately that for him, at least, she was still the loveliest woman in the world.

He led her gently to a seat upon the sofa, brought her cushions, a footstool, and everything that she could possibly desire; then, at a sign from her, he sat down beside her and ventured to lay his hand on hers.

"Nelly!" he said entreatingly, "what can I do for you?"

"You have heard how naughty I was, then?" she asked, with a faint, sad smile. "I know it was very wrong. I meant to ask you to forgive me."

"No, no," he said; "it is quite natural. I understand. You will feel better by and by."

"I must tell you," she said, painfully, "how it happened. Yes, I must. It came from a dream I had last night. I could not forget it all day. It has been coming back to me again and again. Oliver, I saw—him."

Oliver looked at her keenly and waited. He knew that she meant Frank Lovell.

"He was coming towards me, Oliver, with a smile on his face—in his own joyful confident way ; with his hands outstretched, just as he used to meet me when he had been absent for a time ; and I heard him say, 'I am here, Nelly,' and I felt his arms around me, and then I woke up. And it seemed so real and true that I could not get it out of my head for a long time, even after I was awake."

"In another country, with another kind of life, darling, these impressions will fade away."

"Will they? Yes, I suppose they will. I suppose I ought to hope they will. But, Oliver, if they don't? What shall I do?"

"I assure you they will, Nelly."

"Oh, if only I had had more time? You don't know how the dream makes me feel, Oliver. Almost"—a little fearfully—"as if I were doing wrong ; as if Frank were still—still—alive."

Her voice sank to the lowest of tones at the last word. She glanced at him, half hoping that he would be generous

enough to say to her: "Take back your troth, since your heart is not mine; keep faith with the man you love."

But any such generous intention was far from Oliver Dyson's mind.

He was sitting erect now, having relinquished the little cold hand which he had held at first; his brow was contracted, his eyes gloomy, his lips sternly and ominously set.

"You have promised to marry me," he said, "and it is your duty to put away these false imaginings from your mind. You *know* that Frank Lovell is dead. You know that I—I saw him die. Why, then, will you torment yourself and me by thinking of him as alive? Dreams you cannot help, perhaps; but in the daytime—have a little common-sense, and a little self-control!"

He had never before spoken to her so angrily, and ere he had finished Nelly had turned away from him and hidden her face in her hands.

"You are quite right," she murmured, "and I will never speak to you in this way again. Forgive me—and pity me, too;

for I am very miserable. But I will try to be happier by and by, and I will be a true and good wife to you, Oliver—if I can.”

“You are an angel, Nelly, and I am a brute,” cried Dyson remorsefully; and putting his arm round her he drew her to his side, and tried to comfort her by kisses and caresses, which she passively endured but did not try to return.

The twentieth of November came at last. It dawned brightly; there was a touch of frost in the air, but the sky was blue and serene, and there was a sparkling intensity of sunlight on sea and land.

Nelly woke, glanced at the bright landscape, and shivered a little—thinking of another wedding-day, which had been stormy and marked, as it were, with disaster. She remembered the funeral that had met her bridal train at the church gate, and she wept a little at what had seemed like the confirmation of her worst fears. But then she dried her eyes, and resolved to do her best to look cheerful, and to give pleasure to Oliver. She was fully

convinced of his love for her, and, although not in the least reciprocating it, was determined to try to make him happy.

Oliver was in wretched spirits, had she but known it. He also glanced at the sunlight, but with a strange sinking at heart. He would have liked the day to look a little less propitious—a little less smiling and brilliant. The sunshine seemed to mock him and his hopes of happiness.

But, at any rate, there was one thing to be thankful for. His haunting spectre had utterly disappeared. He looked for it as usual over his shoulder, but it was not in sight. Perhaps the bright rays of sunshine had chased it away. Its absence cheered Oliver Dyson as he arranged himself for the wedding.

There were to be no rejoicings, no festivities; the marriage was to be celebrated in the quietest possible way, and even the villagers scarcely knew at what hour the wedding would take place. It was to be at nine o'clock; so that the bride

and bridegroom would then take the earliest possible train to Southampton, whence they meant to cross to Havre at once. Nelly shrank sensitively from the idea of a staring crowd; and Oliver was equally well pleased to escape the formalities which usually accompany a wedding of the conventional pattern.

Nora and Grace had been early to the church, and had decked it with lovely white flowers and graceful foliage-plants.

At nine o'clock Oliver Dyson stood in his place, awaiting the bride. He was pale to the lips and very nervous; but that was only natural, as the few onlookers declared, under the circumstances.

At the last moment, news of the marriage had of course got wind; and some of the village people were to be seen hastening up the path to the church door. And presently the bridal party arrived from the Vicarage.

One or two of the Lovell family had come from a distance to give their countenance to the marriage, of which, on the whole, everybody approved.



It was agreed that "poor little Nelly," so strangely left alone in the world, could not do better than marry again; and who more fitting to be her husband than Frank's old friend and shipmate, Oliver Dyson?

So Nelly came up the aisle, in her lavender silk dress, and plain bonnet, on the arm of Frank's elder brother, and the Vicar himself waited at the altar rails.

Oliver stepped forward to meet his bride, the rest of the party grouped themselves behind the couple, and the marriage ceremony began.

"I require and charge you both, as ye shall answer at the dreadful day of judgment—"

Why did Oliver start and change colour? Why give that sidelong glance over his left shoulder, and turn so deadly pale? Ah, that terrible phantom of Frank Lovell's dead mocking face, clearer and ghastlier than it had ever been before! Enough to put a man off his balance even on his wedding-day.

But why also did the Vicar falter in his solemn charge? And that murmur and stir among the congregation, swelling to a strange, wild shout outside the church—what did it mean? Had other people seen the phantom too? Oliver turned round, with a gasp, to face the situation, and to answer that terrible question for himself.

He turned and saw.

The ghost had taken substance to itself, and stood there in the flesh—the living semblance of Frank Lovell—nay, unless he were very much mistaken, Frank Lovell himself!

## CHAPTER XVI.

### FRUITION.

IN rags and tatters ; thin, gaunt, bearded and hollow-eyed, looking twenty years older than when he went away ; yet veritably Frank Lovell, not to be denied of friend or foe.

Then, with a cry, Oliver Dyson flung up his hands, and made as though he would have fled from the building, had Frank not barred his way.

"Stop him, Jack," said the new-comer quite coolly to his elder brother. "Don't let him go. Thank God I've got here in time to save my Nelly from a villain!"

Whereon the stalwart Jack laid a forcible hand on Dyson's arm, and dragged him, much against his will, into the vestry ;

while Nelly, with a scream which reached the ear even of the crowd which now began to fill the churchyard, flung herself into Frank's arms and fainted upon his shoulder.

The hubbub and excitement were indescribable, and increased from moment to moment, until at last the Vicar insisted on the church being cleared.

Nelly was carried into the vestry, and Frank bent over her in wild alarm, while Mrs. Lovell applied restoratives.

It was perhaps fortunate that his attention was diverted for a few moments from Dyson, who, writhing in Jack's grasp, continued for some little while to gasp out curses and threats of vengeance, until at last his limbs stiffened, and his face grew livid and convulsed in the throes of an epileptic fit. He had to be carried away from the vestry, and was conveyed to the village inn, where Jack Lovell finally left him, under sure guardianship, and returned in haste to the Vicarage to learn more of the circumstances of his brother's unexpected return.

He had missed the earlier portion of the

story (which, of course, he learned later), and entered the drawing-room just as Frank was pouring out in broken tones and eager sentences the conclusion of a hasty narrative of his adventures.

Nelly was drawn close to him by his protecting right arm, her cheek leaning on his shoulder, her hand resting against his neck ; his mother held his other hand, and his father stood before him as if he could not take his eyes off his boy's beloved face. Nora and the others were grouped about him as near as possible, but those who were dearest to him had naturally the nearest places.

Jack, who was of a more reflective turn than Frank had ever been, had occupied himself for some minutes with a consideration of the views which Frank might possibly express concerning Nelly's second marriage ; but when he saw Frank's attitude his fears melted away. He himself, he thought, would not have been quite so ready to overlook her apparent fickleness. But then he did not know what reasons Frank had for comprehending the

full extent of Oliver Dyson's craft and villainy; nor how well he could understand the deceit and treachery to which poor Nelly had almost fallen a victim. At any rate, as it turned out, Frank always steadfastly refused to blame Nelly in the very slightest degree, and maintained stoutly that Dyson's machinations were too subtle to have been resisted by her, especially when they were backed up by the influence of his own father and mother.

" . . . So when I came to myself," Jack heard him say, "I found that I was lying on a desolate, snow-covered beach, and that the men who had dragged my boat to the shore were standing round me, looking at me as if I were a wild animal of some sort. They were a strange-looking set of fellows, clothed in skins, squat and dirty, but not apparently fierce. They were a Kamschatkan tribe from all I could gather. They took me to their huts, which were indescribably filthy, and fed me with blubber and suchlike things; and I was glad enough to feel the warmth and get some food, I can tell you. I fell

asleep at last, worse luck!—for, when I awoke, I found that I had been robbed of all my portable property, including the notes and papers that had been given me by Mr. Dene. I was so overcome with exhaustion and weakness that I must have lain undisturbed through it all. So I fear that I have lost the means of authenticating the details of my visit to the North Pole; and it strikes me very forcibly that no one will ever believe I have been there.”

“*We* shall believe you,” said Nelly.

“*You*, my darling, yes; but not the outside world. However, perhaps that does not matter; and the thieves left me one thing, at least, probably because they feared to disturb me too much while I was sleeping, and also because they did not know the value of the belt that I wore beneath my clothes. My Nelly’s dowry is safe. I will show it you by and by.”

“Then how did you get away from those dreadful people, Frank?”

“They did not try to detain me. I

wandered on, sometimes helped forward in sledges by the natives, sometimes making my way on foot to the nearest port. I must tell you the details of that journey another time. At last, after months of suffering, I got to the sea-coast, and worked my way as a sailor to Yokohama, and thence to San Francisco. After that, everything was pretty easy. I found friends to help me across the States; and then—I chose to work my passage to Liverpool under a different name.”

“But you could have come as a passenger; the survivor of Peters’s expedition would have been welcomed anywhere. Besides, you had the belt, dear; you could have sold some of the stones and got money,” said Nelly, softly.

“Sell *your* stones? What do you take me for?” said Frank, with his bright, natural smile. “I would not have sold them if I had been starving. They were only given to me in trust for you. And as for coming back as a passenger under my own name, I did not want the fuss that would be made over me as a survivor of that



expedition. You would have heard of me long before I came, and I wanted to take you by surprise."

"Oh, Frank! Frank! Suppose you had come too late!" Nelly sobbed into his ear; and Frank tightened his hold upon her and hung his head, as he reflected on the seriousness of the consequences his silence might have produced.

"I was wrong, I see," he murmured; "but I did not think that that fellow's villainy would go so far."

There was so much to think of, so much to say, that it was not for some little time that Jack—otherwise known as Major Lovell—got the opportunity which he desired of speaking to Frank in private.

At last, when the young man had donned fresh garments and had given his cherished belt, loaded with precious things, into Nelly's own keeping, his elder brother touched him on the arm and signed to him to come out into the hall.

"I've been wanting to speak to you for some little time," he said, "especially as

there's a messenger from the inn—from Dyson."

Frank set his teeth and looked hard at his brother.

"What can he be sending messages to *me* for?"

"Frank, wait a bit before you say any more. The man's a villain—a ruffian—but I believe he is dying."

"Dying? Impossible! Rogues live for ever!" said Frank, with a dry laugh.

"Nevertheless, it's true. You know I went with him to the inn and sent for the doctor. I've seen epileptic fits before, and, cur though he is, I didn't like him to be left unattended. He came all right again, and we left him to himself. His luggage was there, having been brought back from the station—and the doctor recommended him to stay in bed. We were hardly down the stairs when we heard—a pistol-shot!"

Frank started. A recollection of the time when he himself had barely saved Oliver Dyson from committing suicide came back to him. Since then he had felt it in his heart to wish that he had not stayed his

hand. But the unworthy thought vanished almost as quickly as it had come, and he now drew a hard breath and asked, almost in a whisper :

“Suicide ?”

“Attempted suicide. We rushed back and found him desperately wounded, but not dead. Hall thought then that there was a chance for him, so I did not tell you at once. But an hour or two ago I got a note from him, saying that Dyson was sinking fast, and had asked to see you.”

“To see *me* !”

“Yes. I thought it out of the question, and sent back word to say so. But now there's another message, more urgent than ever. Will you go, or not ?”

There was a silence. Frank's face had grown grave and even hard ; his arms were crossed on his broad breast, his eyes rested steadily on the floor. Presently he spoke in slow, serious tones.

“That man,” he said, “tried to divide Nelly and me from the very first. He bore me enmity all the time that we were comrades together. When we were left

alone it was I who hindered him from killing himself; but it was he who took advantage of the rescue-party, and doomed me to die of cold and hunger in the snow. Then he hurried back here, and tried to win my wife's heart by lies. That's how the case stands, Jack. What would you do if you were in my place?"

Major Lovell looked at his brother, and put his hand on Frank's shoulder.

"You've got back safe, in spite of all, Frank," he said, rather hoarsely. "And you got back in time to save Nelly. This other chap's dying by his own hand, in misery of body and soul. It's for you to decide."

"You're right!" said Frank, just as if Jack had expressed an opinion—which he had not. "I've too much to be glad of and thankful for to keep up a grudge—even though he *has* injured me. I'll go, Jack. You'll come with me, will you not? We'll leave word that we will be back in half an hour, without saying where we are going. But doesn't he want to see my father?"

"The Vicar's there already," said Major Lovell. "Bless your heart, you don't suppose he wouldn't be off to the bedside of his worst enemy, if he thought he could do any good. Come along, before any of the women see us. We can't stop to explain."

They went almost silently down the road to the little village inn.

It was growing late in the afternoon, and there were lights in the windows when they arrived.

The landlord, looking somewhat pale and scared, came forward with a deprecating air.

"The Vicar and the doctor's with him just now, sir. But they said you was to come up as soon as ever you arrived."

"Father knew you would come," was Jack's remark in a low tone, as Frank turned to the narrow stair. He did not follow; he knew that that chamber of death upstairs was not the place for him. But Frank went in.

The dim room, sparsely lighted with fire and candles, revealed to Frank a

sight for which he was but half prepared. On the bed lay Oliver Dyson—a ghastly and pitiable object, swathed in blood-stained bandages, which left little of his head and face visible. But his eyes—strained, hollow, pain-worn—were more terrible to see than even his disfigured face.

The doctor stood beside him, and the Vicar on the other side seemed to have just risen from his knees.

“You can go away—both of you,” the dying man said, with painful and difficult utterance. “I want Frank Lovell—alone!”

The Vicar withdrew, after a pleading glance towards his son; but the doctor merely took up his stand by the fireplace, out of Dyson’s sight.

It was with a curious sense of solemnity and awe that Frank drew near to the bed where lay the man who had thrown away his life. He could not speak, but his heart was moved to pity as he saw the distorted, disfigured features which no one would

have recognised for those of the once handsome Oliver Dyson.

The dying man spoke first.

"You have won—the game—curse you!" he said.

Frank felt a slight shock.

"Don't say that, Dyson. I'm sorry to see you like this."

"You lie! You are glad!" said the dying man, in the broken, rattling voice that was so sure a sign of failing life that Frank could not be angry at the contradiction.

"I am sorry, Dyson, indeed I am. If I could do anything for you just now I would."

Dyson looked up at him silently. His eye was dim, but he could see the pitying kindness in Frank's face.

"Won't you believe me?" said the younger man.

"I could as soon believe," Dyson answered, with a short, terrible laugh, "in the forgiveness of God!"

"Believe in both, then," said Frank.

"For, I forgive you—as He does, if you but ask Him."

Dyson looked at him intently and shook his head, but there was a softer expression upon his face.

When he next spoke his voice was so indistinct that two or three words only were audible, though Frank put his ear close to the dying man's mouth to listen.

"Ask . . . Nelly . . . forgive. . . ."

These were the only words that Frank could hear. But he understood.

"Yes, I will ask Nelly to forgive you too," he said. "But you need be under no concern. Nelly forgives you, as I do. I am sure of that."

He thought that there was a look of relief—a whispered word or two which he could not catch; and then the dim eye glazed, the white lips quivered and closed, never to open more.

Oliver Dyson was dead.

And the influence of that last scene remained with Frank Lovell so strongly that, much as he had been wronged, and much as he had reason to abhor the memory of



his enemy, he would never speak one word against him, nor suffer any word of hatred or contempt to be spoken against him in his presence without a protest.

"Let him be," he used to say. "He suffered—and he is dead. We have never been tempted as he was."

Frank was long the hero of the newspapers, and might have been courted and caressed by all London society for the length of a season, had he chosen to leave his native village and suffer himself to be lionised. But he preferred to stay at home with his wife and his friends, and enjoy the sweets of a peaceful, quiet life.

The only drawback to Nelly's perfect felicity was the fact that his health had been injured by the extraordinary hardships which he had undergone; but this was hardly to be wondered at, and a few months of complete rest and quiet largely restored his strength.

He read a paper before the Geographical Society, and wrote a book describing his recent travels; but it must be confessed that they scarcely gained the credence which

they deserved; and more than one old *savant* hinted his belief that either Frank Lovell was himself a little crazed, or that he had landed on some hitherto unknown point of the northern hemisphere inhabited by a gentle maniac who had unfortunately convinced both Frank and himself that he had reached the Pole.

. . . . .

Years afterwards Frank took part, however, in an expedition which led him very near the place where he knew he should look for the warmer current of water which kept a channel open through the ice. But no such current of water could be found.

After long and eager examination of every indication, Frank came reluctantly to the conclusion that no such channel existed, and that probably Maurice Dene's prognostications had been fulfilled. The rocky crags had fallen, barring the road into the valley, and blocking up the exit of the river, which must have flooded the valley and formed an immense lake, now probably a mass of

solid ice. Beneath the flood the huts of the natives had been swept away; and they, with their king, had found a speedy death. The City of Bezer was destroyed; the King of Bezer had gone to another city, in which his refuge was secure.

All this Frank said to Nelly when he returned from this, his last expedition to the frozen North; and at first Nelly wept and would not be consoled.

"My poor father!" she said. "I had a sort of hope that I should see him after all."

"I never thought so," Frank answered quietly. "I think he had a true premonition of his end. And you will remember what he said to me—that if I saw Oliver Dyson die, I might be sure that *he* too was dead. It seemed like a superstition—but I had a feeling as if he spoke the truth. I think he died before the day when I came back to you. Don't grieve, Nelly, my darling wife; he is happier now than in even his own strange, self-appointed City of Refuge—that City of Bezer which was in the wilderness indeed. We may be very sure

that wherever he may be he is in no wilderness now."

And although Nelly still wept a little, she was comforted.

THE END.







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